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Romances



FEATURE STORY
BY DALLAS SCHULZE
PLUS 3 OTHER FAVORITE
AUTHORS

Tell Me a Story
If Ever I Loved You
The Proper Miss Porter
Star-crossed

DALLAS SCHULZE
PHYLLIS HALLDORSON
RUTH LANGAN
REGAN FOREST

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DALLAS SCHULZE

Dallas loves books, old movies, her husband and her cat, not necessarily in that order. She's a sucker for a happy ending, and writing them has given her an outlet for her imagination. Dallas hopes that readers have half as much fun with her books as she does! She has more hobbies than there is space to list them, but is currently working on a doll collection.

PHYLLIS HALLDORSON

at age sixteen met her real-life Prince Charming. She married him a year later, and they settled down to raise a family. A compulsive reader, Phyllis dreamed of someday finding the time to write stories of her own. When she was introduced to romance novels, she knew she had found her long-delayed vocation. After all, how could she write anything else after living all those years with her very own Silhouette hero?



RUTH LANGAN

Ruth traces her ancestry to Scotland and Ireland. It is no surprise, then, that she feels a kinship with the characters. Married to her childhood sweetheart, she has raised five children and lives in Michigan, the state where she was born and raised.

REGAN FOREST

is the author of seven books for Harlequin Temptation, our steamiest line of contemporary romances. She has also written several Harlequin Intrigue novels along with numerous magazine articles. A native of Nebraska, Regan attended university in Arizona and Southern California, obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree and doing graduate studies in anthropology and education. She currently conducts writing workshops and seminars in Arizona.



HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST *Romances*

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

With winter now behind us, I'm really looking forward to Spring and the fresh beginnings it brings! This month, the World's Best Romances presents a unique collection of stories—each one sure to send your heart soaring!

So right now, I'm setting everything aside to be swept away as...a wealthy playboy becomes a model parent when he finds a homeless little girl and begins to consider many things which directly concern a very scared green-eyed beauty...an artist, ready to marry once again, discovers she's still married to the man who walked out on her just four hours after their wedding seven years ago...a struggling, single mom not only gets a well-deserved promotion but a lovesick boss whose determination she doesn't have time for...and a safari holiday turns into an adventure of a lifetime that could change the course of two hearts as they share a fiery passion for each other and the world's wild places!

Join me as I savor each wonderful story in this fabulous edition of the World's Best Romances!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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CANDY LEE
MANAGING EDITOR

SHELLEY CINNAMON
ART DIRECTOR

TOM JOHNSTON
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR

BONNIE HALEY
SUBSCRIPTION MANAGER

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WORLD'S BEST

Romances

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DALLAS SCHULZE

Tell Me a Story



Ann was a doctor, responsible for people's lives. Control was essential to her work. But Flynn McCallister and one very special little girl weakened that control, and it scared her....

Flynn was positive that newspapers did not move on their own. This piece of brilliant reasoning burst into his alcohol-soaked mind with the force of a lightning bolt.

He slumped against the wall. If the papers were not moving themselves, he should know why they were moving. After all, this was his alley. Since his family owned the building, they owned the alley, too.

The papers shifted more violently and Flynn's frown deepened into a scowl. That was an arm. Thin and pale and amazingly fragile. He couldn't just walk off and leave it in the possession of these animated and possibly dangerous papers. What if this was the first wave of an invading force from another planet? This could be an alien pod looking for some innocent human to take over their body.

It didn't occur to Flynn that the alley behind a luxury apartment building in Los Angeles seemed an odd starting point for an interplanetary invasion. At five o'clock in the morning, after drinking all night, anything seemed possible.

Filled with pixilated patriotism, Flynn managed to cross the space between himself and the suspicious papers. The lump jerked alarmingly and the papers cascaded in all directions.

"Hey! Get off my foot, you big ox."

Flynn slumped down and found himself gazing into a small heart-shaped face with fine sandy brows drawn together in a fierce scowl. He smiled at the face in a friendly way. "Sorry. Are you a pod?"

The scowl on the little face returned in triplicate. "I'm not a pod. I'm a girl."

Flynn was vaguely disappointed. He'd been looking forward to telling his father that aliens had landed and they'd chosen McCallister property as their landing site. The old man would have had an apoplectic fit at their effrontery.

He sighed. "What are you doing under that pile of papers?"

"I was trying to sleep," she told him with heavy sarcasm.

His brows rose. "Wouldn't a bed be more comfortable?"

"I don't have a bed." The statement was flat, leavened with a touch of scorn.

Flynn's brows shot up until they almost met the heavy fall of black hair that drifted onto his forehead. "No bed? It doesn't seem fair. I have more beds than I know what to do with. We'll go to my 'partment and find you a bed. Bound to be a spare or two lying around the place."

He struggled to his feet, leaning one hand on his companion's shoulder once he achieved his goal. He frowned down at her. "You're not very big, are you?"

She drew herself up straighter, almost unbalancing him as she guided his erratic footsteps across the alley.

The door to the apartment building closed behind them with an expansive whoosh of air. Flynn blinked rapidly in the sudden glare of light. A bank of four elevators lined one wall. With a great deal of concentration, he managed to punch out a short combination of numbers that opened the doors on the elevator. Once on board, Flynn grabbed for the nearest wall as the floor surged upward, leaving his stomach somewhere beneath him.

"Are you okay, mister?"

He closed his eyes in exquisite agony as the elevator stopped and the doors slid open, revealing a wide foyer and two beautifully carved wooden doors on either side.

Using her shoulder as a brace, he steered her out of the elevator.

"Which door, mister?"

Flynn turned slowly and then pointed to the door on the left with a gesture worthy of Lady Macbeth. "Don't go near that door. A dragon lives there. She has red hair and cold green eyes and she can freeze your bones with one look."

His new acquaintance shook her head, her small face twisted in an expression of adult exasperation.

"You're drunker'n a skunk."

Flynn frowned. He followed her lead to the other door and reached out to push the door open. They stepped onto thick, soft carpeting and the door clicked quietly shut behind them. He spun on one heel with more enthusiasm than sense and stumbled. He gave her a smile that

had been known to make little old ladies swoon with pleasure.

She was not impressed. Her small mouth was pursed in stern disapproval.

He stumbled down the two steps that led into the living room and almost sprawled onto the carpet. Some rapid and surprisingly graceful footwork kept him upright, and he turned to grin at her triumphantly.

"Fred Astaire, eat your heart out," he exclaimed expansively.

She caught the twinkle in his eye and giggled. "You're very silly."

"Thank you. I do my best." He swayed for a moment before regaining his balance. His lips twisted in a rueful smile. "I'm afraid my night of wicked carousing is catching up with me." He blinked to clear his foggy vision. "We'd better get you settled before I collapse."

He set his feet down with neat precision, each step carefully planned and executed as he led the way through one of the doors that faced onto the hallway. The bedroom was beautifully done in shades of brown and slate blue. Plush blue carpeting and drapes formed a background for the rich mahogany furniture.

Slowly, the little girl moved into the room, staring around her with wide gray eyes. In her childish eyes, the room was reflected as a palace and, for an instant, he saw her vision, pushing aside the hurtful memories that tainted it.

She tiptoed across the thick carpet and reached out to touch the heavy bedspread, drawing back before her hand made contact.

He crossed the room in a few quick strides and grabbed hold of the bedspread, jerking it off the bed and tossing it carelessly on the floor.

"It's so beautiful." She bent to touch the discarded bedspread reverently.

"It's beautiful, but it's only a thing." He looked down at his diminutive companion. "Make yourself at home. This is a good room. It used to belong to my brother," he said.

She watched him silently, only speaking when he would have pulled the door shut behind him. "Hey, mister, could you leave the door open?"

He stuck his head around the door and grinned at her. "You bet, and I'll leave the hall light on, too. My bedroom is two doors down on the right. If you need anything, just come in and poke me. Good night, urchin."

Flynn walked the few feet to his bedroom, deliberately encouraging the alcoholic fumes to cushion his mind. Once in the room, he collapsed on the wide bed. He groaned softly. God, he was drunk. He hadn't been this smashed in years. Not since he and Mark . . . No. He didn't want to remember. Not now. Not when his defenses were at an all-time low.

The memories faded and were replaced by tiny features capped with a mop of raggedly cut sandy hair. His mouth tilted up. Cute little thing. Who was she? Good Lord, he didn't even know her name! Oh, well, in the morning he could find out her name and who her parents were, and

he'd get her back where she belonged.

The mists of drink and exhaustion gradually thickened, creating swirling pockets of peace in his tired thoughts. The faint lines beside his mouth smoothed out as his breathing deepened and slowed.

FLYNN'S NOSE twitched and his eyelids flickered. His head hurt with a relentless, pounding throb that moved from the top of his skull all the way down his body. His nose twitched again. What was that smell? Acrid and smoky.

"Are you awake, mister?" He rolled onto his side. The little girl from the night before was perched on the edge of the bed. "I made you some coffee."

"Bless you." He dragged himself into a sitting position. He lifted the cup to his mouth and took a sip. Flynn's eyes sprang from half-mast to wide open. He was about to spit the foul liquid back into the cup when his eyes fell on his small houseguest. Wide gray eyes peered from beneath ragged, sandy bangs. Without another thought, he swallowed, praying that his stomach lining was tougher than it felt.

"It's wonderful."

His companion smiled. "Mom says you can't start a day without coffee."

"I . . . ah . . . feel the same way." Flynn tried to look casual as he held the cup as far from his nose as possible. "I don't think we were properly introduced last night. I'm Flynn McCallister."

"I'm Rebecca Antoinette Sinclair. You can call me Becky. Do you want some more coffee?"

"No! I mean, one cup is my limit." He looked at Becky. "It's been a while since I was your age, but I'm sure I'd remember if sleeping in alleys was normal. Where's your mom and dad?"

"I don't have a daddy." Her chin thrust out. "He left when I was real little."

"Okay. What about your mom? Where is she?"

The tough little chin quivered. "I don't know. She was s'posed to come home a couple weeks ago. She went away with one of her boyfriends. She was supposed to come back on Monday. Only she didn't. Mrs. Castle said she was going to report me to the welfare people. Mama told me all about them." Becky's brows came together. "I couldn't let the welfare people take me away. They'd never let me see her again."

Flynn closed his eyes, half hoping Becky would turn out to be a figment of an alcohol-soaked imagination. But when he opened them again, she was still sitting there, her eyes fixed on him.

"You won't call the welfare people, will you?"

He looked at her, wondering what imp of fate had chosen to drop her into his lap.

"No, I won't call the welfare people." Flynn thrust his fingers through his hair and stood. "The first thing I'm going to do is to pick up the paper and the mail and then I'm going to take a hot shower. Then we'll sit down and talk about what we're going to do with you."

Flynn went to the front door. He stepped into the hall just as the elevator came to a halt. His smile took on a wicked edge.

Ann Perry had lived in the apartment across from him for two years. She was young, attractive, single, and she sternly disapproved of him. He could never quite resist the urge to reinforce her image of him as a worthless, womanizing playboy.

He leaned against the doorjamb. He knew exactly the picture he presented. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. He was unshaven. His hair was tousled. His feet were bare. His shirt was unbuttoned to the waist and his belt was unbuckled. He looked the very picture of worthless masculinity. It was perfect.

The elevator doors slid open and Flynn felt a twinge of guilt. In the instant before she saw him, she looked tired. There was a vulnerable droop to her shoulders. But the moment her eyes fell on him, her shoulders stiffened.

Flynn slumped against the wall, letting his eyes trail insolently over her.

"Ms. Perry. Home from a day of saving lives?"

She tilted her head. "Mr. McCallister. Home from a night of drinking?"

She stalked to her door, stopping to pick up her mail and the newspaper.

Ann was aware of Flynn McCallister's eyes following her every move. She fumbled with the key before stepping into the haven of her home. She resisted the urge to slam the door. She wouldn't give him the

satisfaction of knowing he disturbed her.

Three feet away, her housemate launched himself into her arms. It was Oscar's preferred method of greeting. She carried the huge tomcat into the kitchen and set him on the floor.

"I saw McCallister in the hall. He looked like he'd been up all night. Again."

Oscar murmured sympathetically. He was familiar with the problem of McCallister.

It annoyed Ann that McCallister could read her so easily, and it annoyed her even more that she couldn't control her reaction to him. She was a doctor. People's lives rested in her hands every day. Control was essential in her work, and it carried over into her private life. With nothing but a look and a quirk of an eyebrow, Flynn McCallister managed to weaken that control, and she resented it.

The phone rang, startling her out of her thoughts, and she jumped. It would be her father. He would want a progress report. How did she tell him that a medical career wasn't like being a corporate executive where every day she could report some deal closed, some new advance toward a vice presidency? The triumphs of helping a patient didn't interest him in the least. He wanted to know where her career was going. He thought she was progressing too slowly.

Twenty minutes later she put down the phone, feeling more drained than when she'd left the hospital.

She'd planned to go out and do some shopping, but maybe it would be a good idea to take a long hot bath and unwind. She had the next two days off, and a relaxing evening at home would be a nice way to start her little vacation.

She left the kitchen and headed toward her bedroom, but she was sidetracked by Oscar, who was sprawled flat on his back in the middle of the living-room floor. She stopped to scratch his ample tummy, and he took it as an invitation to play.

The sudden pounding on the door interrupted the wrestling match. Oscar rolled to his feet and streaked for the bedroom.

She grasped the doorknob, ready to give whoever it was her iciest look.

The last thing she'd expected to find on her doorstep was Flynn McCallister, clad in nothing but a towel and a panicked expression.

She dragged her eyes from his chest and looked at his face. Something was wrong. What was he saying?

"...in the shower and she fell. There's blood all over."

The doctor in her took over. "I'll be right there."

FLYNN WAS kneeling on the floor next to one of the sofas, his naked back blocking Ann's view.

"She's a doctor and she'll know just what to do." His voice was soothing and full of confidence.

"But you said that a dragon lived next door." The voice was definitely feminine and just as definitely under ten years of age.

Ann filed the words away to examine at some other time. Right now, what mattered was her patient.

Stepping around Flynn, she knelt by the sofa. Other than being female, the child bore no resemblance to her hasty image of a woman who'd been cavorting in Flynn's shower. She was small-boned and fragile, with a mop of badly cut sandy hair. Her gray eyes were swimming with tears.

"I was in the shower and I heard her fall. I don't know what happened. Becky was looking at magazines when I went into the bathroom." Flynn's voice was tight with concern.

"I was just trying to get a closer look at that picture on the wall, Mr. Flynn. I stood up on the sofa, but I slipped on a book and hit my head on the table." Ann glanced over her shoulder at the coffee table. It was a massive affair of glass and wood. Becky was lucky the damage was as minor as it was.

Becky's eyes met hers solemnly, more than a trace of uncertainty in their depths. Ann smiled and the look faded a bit, but it wasn't replaced by trust. Ann had a feeling that this was not a child who trusted easily.

"IT REALLY wasn't a very big cut, just a nasty one. In a few days you'll hardly be able to tell that you were ever hurt."

She lifted her head and was surprised to find that Becky was holding out her hand, her small face very solemn. "Thank you, Miss..." Her face scrunched up in thought and

then she shook her head. "I can't remember your name."

"Ann. Ann Perry." Since it seemed to be expected of her, Ann took Becky's hand and shook it. "You're very welcome. I'm glad I was here."

Flynn stood at the top of the steps, having returned from getting dressed. His expression was anxious. He looked like a tousled satyr.

"Well, urchin, you certainly look a lot less gruesome than you did."

"Ann says that in a few days I'll be good as new."

Becky lifted a worn shopping bag and carefully took out a stuffed giraffe. Next came a well-thumbed book. Ann picked up the giraffe.

"That's Frankie," Becky said. "I've had him since I was a baby."

"Did your mother give him to you?"

Becky hesitated a minute and then shook her head. "I think Daddy gave him to me."

Ann fingered the distinctive button in the toy's ear and picked up the book. It was *A Child's Garden of Verses*, a beautiful leather-bound edition, old and much worn, showing the love of more than one generation.

"Was this your daddy's when he was a little boy?"

"I don't know. - Mama doesn't much like to talk about him." She took the book from Ann and set it next to the giraffe, clearly saying that the subject was closed. Ann accepted her lead, knowing that you didn't win a child's confidence by pushing.

"Becky, why don't you go out and take a look at the plants on the balcony. I want to talk to Flynn."

Flynn looked at Ann, one dark brow arching in question. Becky looked from one to the other and her pale brows puckered.

"Are you going to fight?" Becky looked at Flynn, clearly more willing to trust his judgment than Ann's.

"Go on out, urchin. There's some hand tools in the box next to the door. Why don't you dig in one of the empty planters. I promise we're not going to come to blows."

Ann hired professional gardeners to care for her garden. It was lovely, not a leaf out of place, and she seldom paid any attention to it. Flynn's garden was considerably less neat. Some of the planters were empty, while others held such a wealth of vegetation, it was hard to distinguish one plant from another. It was the perfect place for a child to play. She watched Becky disappear into the jungle of growth, trowel in hand.

The smile that softened her mouth disappeared when she turned to look at Flynn. She settled onto an off-white overstuffed chair and then realized it was a tactical error. The huge, puffy cushions practically swallowed her. She shot Flynn an annoyed look.

"She said that you found her in the alley last night and offered her a bed. Is that true?"

"Pretty much."

Ann ground her teeth together. "Flynn. Didn't it occur to you that her mother would be worried about her? I've always known that you were irresponsible but I wouldn't have believed that even you would

do something like this. That poor woman must be out of her mind with worry."

"You've always known that I was irresponsible? On what do you base this sweeping judgment?"

Ann opened her mouth but he cut her off with a sharp gesture. "I don't really want to hear it. Becky's mother disappeared two weeks ago. The landlady was about to turn Becky over to Social Services. Becky is terrified of them so she ran away. She's been living on the streets for the past few days. No matter how irresponsible I am, I think I'm a better bet than the streets."

"That's not the issue. She says you were intoxicated last night."

"Smashed to the gills."

"You can't possibly think that's a good influence for a child."

"It was my brother's birthday."

"And that's supposed to make it all right? The two of you go out and—"

"Not the two of us. I was alone. Mark died three years ago."

Ann wondered if it were possible to coax the huge chair into swallowing her completely. "I'm sorry."

There was a moment of silence and then Flynn ran his fingers through his hair. The crooked smile he gave her was half apology and wholly charming.

"I'm the one who should be sorry. I know you're concerned about Becky and I shouldn't be giving you such a hard time."

"She can't just continue to stay here. What are you going to do?"

He rubbed his forehead. "Either I'm getting too old to drink like that or hangovers are getting worse. I

thought I'd take her out to my parents' home tomorrow. They may have some ideas. You're welcome to come along just to make sure that I don't sell her to the white slavers." He grinned to show her that there was no rancor behind the words.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd feel better seeing this a little farther. I don't know why. I hardly know Becky."

"There's something about her that sort of gets under your skin."

Ann nodded, suppressing the thought that Becky might not be the only one.

LYING IN the huge bed that night, the covers tucked under her chin, Becky's youth and fragility were more apparent than ever.

Flynn sat on the edge of the bed and brushed the hair back from her forehead. He smiled at her. Ann was stunned to feel a twinge of envy.

"Could you tell me a story, Mr. Flynn? Mama always tells me a story 'fore bedtime."

Ann barely listened as he began to spin a story full of dragons and princesses and handsome princes. She didn't want to hear the soft rise and fall of his voice. She didn't want to see the way his eyes softened when he looked at Becky. She didn't want to like him. It wasn't safe.

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she jumped when he touched her arm. Becky was fast asleep, her lashes lying in soft crescents against her cheeks. She didn't stir as the two adults eased themselves off the bed and tiptoed out of the room.

Flynn followed her to the door and Ann was vividly aware of him every step of the way. She stepped into the hall, feeling as if she were escaping some fatal temptation. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

He nodded, stifling a yawn. "I'll come knock on your door around ten."

When she opened her own door, she turned, lifting her hand in what she hoped was a casual gesture.

As she shut the door, Oscar looked up, his yellow eyes full of polite inquiry.

"Oh, Oscar. What have I gotten myself into?"

*

THE MCCALLISTER home in Santa Barbara smelled of old money—lots of it. Some of the antiques were one of a kind pieces—all of them were exquisite.

Ann hadn't given much conscious thought to what Flynn's father would be like, but she'd had a vague image of an older version of Flynn—tall, lean, with elegantly masculine grace.

She hadn't expected a stocky man a few inches short of six feet. His features were blunt, his eyes a clear, sharp gray rather than electric blue. The only resemblance she could see was the thick black hair, now heavily streaked with gray.

His handshake was firm, his look direct, lacking the lazy charm that made his son so fascinating—and so exasperating.

David McCallister nodded to his son, his eyes cool. "Flynn. I thought you might call this week."

"So Mom told me. You know how I always hate to do the expected. Besides, we would have quarreled and that seems like a hell of a way to honor Mark's birthday." His tone closed the subject and there was an uncomfortable silence in the study.

Ann looked around the room, admiring the walls of books, most of them leather bound. One shelf held trophies, another family photographs. The silence lengthened. She moved over to the photos, studying them with interest. It wasn't hard to identify the family members. There was a stocky young man who showed up in most of the photos. That must've been Mark. Flynn was in some of the pictures, sometimes in the background, sometimes with his arm over his older brother's shoulder. But there were no photos of Flynn alone. Ann turned away from the pictures, not wanting to think about the implications of what she was seeing. She cleared her throat.

"You have a lovely home, Mr. McCallister. Flynn tells me he grew up here."

His eyes snapped to her, dark and fierce. "Did he mention his brother?"

Ann glanced at Flynn, but he didn't shift his eyes from his shoes. She was on her own. "Flynn told me that his brother died three years ago. That must have been a terrible time for all of you."

"My son Mark was a wonderful boy. He was a police officer. Died in the line of duty."

"You must have been very proud of him."

"I was." Father and son stared at each other across an abyss that had

obviously been there for a very long time. Flynn smiled, the insolent smile that Ann had seen so often the past two years.

"Hey, Dad, don't feel bad. One out of two ain't bad."

The older man's face darkened, and Ann braced herself for the explosion that was sure to follow. She'd seen that look in her own father's eyes too often to mistake it. Why had Flynn provoked him?

The explosion didn't come.

Louise McCallister stepped into the room. The older woman's eyes took in the situation immediately, and Ann caught a glimpse of her distress before she set about smoothing the waters.

"Becky is settled in the kitchen and Maggie is teaching her how to bake cookies. What a charming child. I'm so glad you brought her to see us, Flynn."

The next few hours passed on a more calm note, though Ann had the feeling that the hostilities lay just beneath the surface. By the time Becky's immediate future was hammered out, Ann felt as if she'd witnessed a battle between the superpowers.

It was agreed that Becky's terror of the welfare department eliminated the possibility of calling the authorities. On the other hand, something had to be done about finding her mother. It was Flynn's suggestion that they call a private detective and, very reluctantly, his father agreed that it seemed like a reasonable alternative.

"MARK AND I used to play on those swings. I bet they haven't been used

since we were kids." Flynn waved at Becky, who was happily absorbed in pumping herself as high as possible on the swings in the backyard.

"You and your father don't get along very well, do you?" Ann hadn't planned on asking the question.

"A masterpiece of understatement if I've ever heard one." Flynn's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "As far as he's concerned, I haven't done anything right since I was born."

Ann stared at Becky without seeing her. Flynn's words brought back her own childhood too vividly for comfort. "It must have been hard to please him."

Flynn shrugged. "I quit trying long ago."

"How can you not try to please your father?" The concept was foreign to her.

"I suppose I might have been more inclined to try if it hadn't been for my older brother. You see, Mark was perfect." His smile twisted with memories. "Captain of his football team, captain of the debating team. He was intelligent, polite, handsome and had a great sense of humor. It was all absolutely sincere. He was truly the greatest older brother any kid could want."

"But you couldn't compete." Ann's voice was soft. She knew just how he felt, though her competition had been the ideal of a son who'd never existed outside her father's dreams.

"I couldn't compete. I sometimes think I became a rebel just to give myself an identity. At least Dad noticed me as something other than Mark's shadow. I can't say I don't

enjoy doing exactly what I'm doing. The fact that it irritates Dad is just a side effect."

"Just what do you do?" He slanted her an amused look and Ann flushed, realizing how critical the question sounded. "I mean, you don't seem to go to work or anything..."

The smile he turned on her was brilliant. "I'm a professional playboy. The truly useless man-about-town." He bowed low before her.

She shook her head, unable to imagine a life without the limits of work or school to frame the days. "I can't imagine not having a job."

"That's the trouble with the world today. Nobody can imagine life without jobs."

Silence fell between them. There was something about him that disturbed her in ways she didn't understand. He was so... different. She'd never known anyone like him.

"Hold still." His voice was hushed and Ann froze as he reached toward her. She felt his hand in her hair and when he pulled away, there was a ladybug resting on the tip of his finger. He held his hand up and blew gently. The tiny insect hesitated a moment and then flew away.

"You know, for a dragon, you're pretty nice." Flynn's hand came up to tug at a lock of red hair that had escaped from her braid. His head was lowering toward hers, that brilliant blue gaze fixed on her mouth.

His mouth touched hers and her eyelids fell shut as if attached to weights. She could smell the faint tang of after-shave. Her mouth opened the smallest amount and the kiss deepened. Their breath mingled

until it was impossible to tell where one began and the other ended.

She could feel something waiting just out of reach. Something exciting and dangerous and full of promise. Something she wasn't sure she was ready to reach for.

"Mr. Flynn."

The voice seemed to come from a long way away. At first Ann couldn't even make sense of what it was saying.

"Mr. Flyyyyynnn."

Her eyes opened slowly as Flynn's mouth left hers. In his eyes she could see some of the same surprise she was feeling.

"Becky wants you. I... ah... I think I'll go see if I can help your mother with dinner." She walked away before he could say anything.

IF ANN HAD seriously believed that her involvement with Becky and Flynn was going to end after the visit to his parents, she was doomed to disappointment. Over the next few days, the focus of her life seemed to shift. Whether she wished it or not, she was caught up in Becky's life. And through her, Ann was caught up in Flynn McCallister's life. There just didn't seem to be anything else to do.

"LOOK AT IT GO, Mr. Flynn. I bet it could go clear to the moon."

Flynn reached out to steady Becky's small hands on the spool of kite string and then leaned back on his elbows, staring up at the bright scarlet kite that floated high above them. Not since Mark's death had he felt so relaxed. He shifted one hand, touching Becky's slim back affec-

tionately. It felt so right to be here with her. He'd never thought of himself as a family man, but Becky was making him reconsider. And Ann. Ann was making him reconsider a lot of things. Like Becky, she'd become an integral part of his life.

Dangerous thinking, McCallister. Next thing you know, you'll be thinking about rings and babies.

And why not?

He sat up, oblivious to Becky's startled look. He'd begun to think of himself as a confirmed bachelor. He hadn't thought about marriage and children in years. Now, suddenly, the idea didn't seem quite so alien. Almost appealing.

"Something wrong, Mr. Flynn?"

ANN TRIED not to think of how impossible the day had seemed. Her heart hadn't been in the job, and that was a dangerous thing for a doctor. She'd gone through all the motions and done all the right things but, in the back of her mind, she'd wondered what Becky and Flynn were doing. She'd wished she were doing it with them.

"So what did you two do today?" she asked during dinner.

"Mr. Flynn got a big kite and we flew it for a long time, only then he got it caught in a tree."

"I prefer to think of it as the tree got in my way."

Ann answered his grin with a smile, surprised to realize how right it felt to be sitting across the table from him.

After dinner, Ann loaded the dishwasher with only a few token protests from Flynn. She insisted

that it was the least she could do, and he didn't argue long.

She wandered out into the living room to find Flynn and Becky sitting on the sofa. A box was on the table in front of them. Ann crossed the soft carpet and sank onto the sofa on Becky's other side.

"What have you got?"

"Pictures." The succinct answer came from Becky. Flynn appeared to be half dozing.

Ann reached for a handful of the photographs that were scattered across the table. She expected to find family pictures. But the first was a picture of the park across the street. A little boy was wearing a bright red raincoat and hat, with incongruously bare feet. The camera had caught him in the act of jumping into a shallow puddle, his face ecstatic. Leaning drunkenly against a bench nearby was a pair of red rain boots.

The next photo was of an old woman. Her face was weathered with decades of hard living, but there was pride in the set of her chin, in the clarity of her eyes. Pride that wasn't dimmed by the shopping cart of belongings that sat next to her.

Ann blinked back tears. "Did you take these?"

"It's a hobby."

"They're beautiful."

"Thanks. I've got a small dark-room and I enjoy playing with it."

"You've done a lot more than play with these. You could get them published."

He took the pictures she still held and put them in the box with the others. "I probably could. But I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"Ann, if I sold some photos, it would cease to be a hobby and become a career. I couldn't play with it anymore. People would expect me to take wonderful photos according to their schedules. It wouldn't be fun anymore."

"But you can't just take pictures like that and not do something with them."

"Why not?"

The simple question seemed to stymie her. She stared at him blankly for a moment. "You just can't."

Flynn stood up, abandoning the subject. "Time for bed, urchin." He ignored the inevitable protests and herded her toward the bedroom. Ann followed. Becky was soon tucked into bed with Frankie the giraffe snuggled beside her.

"Tell me a story, Mr. Flynn." Flynn told her a story about a frog who became a prince and the princess who loved him even when he was a frog.

He finished the story and reached up to tuck the covers under her chin. "Good night, Becky."

"Mr. Flynn? Do you think I'll ever see my mama again?"

Flynn was aware of Ann coming to stand behind him. What was he supposed to say? Life didn't offer any guarantees. Not even to children.

"We've got a man looking for her, honey. He's very good at finding people. All we can do is cross our fingers that he'll find her soon."

*

ANN LOOKED at the clock in her apartment and frowned. Flynn had only been gone a little over an hour. As soon as he'd talked to the private detective and found out if there were any leads to Becky's mother, he'd come home. There was no sense in watching the clock.

When the doorbell rang fifteen minutes later, Ann practically flew to the door, Becky hard on her heels.

"Flynn—"

"Mr. Flynn—"

Both sentences came to an abrupt halt. The man standing outside the door was short, stocky and balding, and the expression on his face bore no resemblance to Flynn's lazy charm.

"Dad." Ann knew her tone fell short of enthusiasm.

"Ann." He nodded. "Obviously, you were expecting someone else."

She stepped back, aware of Becky retreating to stand next to Oscar. "Dad, this is Rebecca Sinclair. She's staying across the hall and I'm taking care of her for a little while. Becky, this is my father, Mr. Perry."

He acknowledged the introduction with a short nod.

"Staying with the McCallister fellow, is she? I thought you were steering clear of him."

Robert Perry believed that children should be treated as if they were part of the furniture, which included not only silence, but deafness.

Luckily, the doorbell rang again before Ann had to find an answer for her father's comment.

"Flynn." They had only an instant in the semi-privacy of the hall. There was no time for Ann to ask any questions about his visit with the private detective. Her eyes met his and he shook his head slightly before Becky clutched him around the knees.

"Hi, urchin." He bent and swooped her up. Her giggles drew a smile from Ann, a smile that died when she looked at her father.

"Flynn, this is my father, Robert Perry."

Robert Perry's face expressed his disapproval of both Flynn and Becky. "I understand Ann has been baby-sitting for you. My daughter is a very busy woman. I hope you don't plan to intrude on her time like this again."

"Dad!" Ann could feel the color coming up in her cheeks. She looked at Flynn, half expecting him to stalk out in a rage. But, of course, Flynn McCallister never did the expected.

His mouth twisted in a half smile that brought an angry flush to Robert Perry's face.

"I think Ann can take care of herself. She's never hesitated to speak her mind in the past. Of course, you have to be willing to listen to hear what she's saying." His words fell into a little pool of silence.

He shifted Becky from one arm to the other, tugging the door shut behind him, cutting off the sound of Becky's giggling pleas to be put down. Ann stared at the door for a long moment, surprised by the strength of the urge to follow him.

THAT NIGHT after they put Becky to bed, Ann slid farther back on Flynn's sofa and leaned her head against its back. How had it happened that, in the space of a few short days, Flynn McCallister had gone from being a thorn in her side to being an oasis of calm?

Flynn swirled the wine in his glass.

"How did the visit with your father go?"

In her current relaxed state, not even the mention of her father could seriously dim the warm glow Ann felt.

"The same as usual. I should be further along in my career. I don't attend the right gatherings. He doesn't like my cat, my apartment, my life-style."

"And Becky and me."

"It's nothing personal. He just worries that I'll let things get in the way of my career."

"Things like personal relationships?" He leaned forward and picked up the wine bottle, filling Ann's glass. "You know, I've found that you can't always fulfill your parents' dreams for you."

Ann frowned into her glass. "Did you know that I wanted to be a veterinarian when I was a kid?"

"Why didn't you?"

She swallowed the wine. "My father thought it was dumb. Doctoring people is more important than animals." She yawned. "I'm sorry. I should have warned you that wine makes me sleepy."

"That's okay. Do you ever regret it?"

~~"That wine makes me sleepy? It~~
doesn't cause me much trouble." She blinked at him owlishly. Her eyelids

felt so heavy. "I really should be going home."

Flynn watched as her head slipped slowly to the side, her eyes shut, her mouth the slightest bit open as she slid into sleep. There was a funny ache in his chest. She looked so vulnerable. He looked at her a moment longer and then left the room.

When he returned, he was carrying a pillow and a blanket. Ann didn't twitch when he tucked the pillow under her head. He covered her with the blanket, and she cuddled under its light warmth.

Thirty-three was a hell of a time to fall in love for the first time. He'd almost begun to think it would never happen. He tucked the blanket more firmly around her shoulder and moved away, scooping up the glasses and the half-empty wine bottle on his way to the kitchen.

THE JANGLE of the phone was an unexpected intrusion and Ann jumped. What if it was Flynn? In the two days since she'd awakened on his sofa, she'd managed to avoid much contact with him. There was something about him that made it all too easy to reveal things she didn't want revealed, say things she didn't even want to think.

The phone rang again, and she took a deep breath and reached for it.

"Ann?"

"Oh, hello, Dad." The relief was only temporary.

~~"I wanted to let you know that I've taken matters into my own hands."~~

"What matters?"

"When we talked about that child that McCallister is keeping, I told you that the only thing to do was call the Social Services. After giving it careful thought, I felt it would be best for all concerned if someone did the right thing, so I called Social Services this morning."

"You did what?" Ann hadn't thought it was possible to be so angry so quickly. "How dare you interfere like this? You had no right!" She slammed the receiver down.

She had to warn Flynn. Barefoot, she flew out of the apartment and across the hall. It seemed like hours before the door opened.

"Flynn, I'm so sorry. My father called—"

"Come in and meet Ms. Davis, Ann. She's here about Becky."

Ann looked past his shoulder to the woman who sat in the living room. She stretched her stiff facial muscles into a smile and hoped she didn't look as sick as she felt.

"Is SHE gone?" The adults turned to find Becky peering into the living room, her eyes wide and uncertain.

"She's gone."

"She's not going to make me go away with her?"

"Nobody is going to make you go anywhere." Flynn bent to catch the little girl as she flew across the room to him. He swept her up easily, accepting her arms around his neck and returning the hug. Ann swallowed a lump in her throat.

"She wanted to take me away, didn't she?" Becky's voice was muffled by Flynn's shoulder.

"She wanted to make sure that you were all right."

"Is she going to let me stay with you?"

Flynn stroked the back of her head, offering her physical reassurance as well as verbal. "She's going to let you stay with me. She was just worried about you and she wanted to make sure Ann and I were taking good care of you."

Becky snuggled her head deeper into his neck.

Apparently that was all the reassurance Becky required. If Mr. Flynn said it was going to be fine, she'd believe him. Her arms loosened around his neck, her world set right again.

Flynn set Becky down and she skipped off, confident that all was right with her world as long as Flynn was in it.

Ann shifted toward the door, her eyes settling on a point somewhere beyond Flynn's shoulder. "I... I'm sorry about what my father did."

"Where are you going?"

Her eyes flickered to his face and then away. "I didn't think I'd be welcome."

Flynn caught her arm. "Ann, you can't possibly think I blame you for what your father did? It had nothing to do with you. I know that."

His voice was so gentle that Ann had to blink back tears. It had been a long time since anyone had used that tone with her. It made her want to lean her head on his chest and let him take care of her.

His head lowered, and Ann closed her eyes as he kissed the tear from her cheek.

Her hands slid around his neck, pulling him closer. She felt as if all her life she'd been only half-alive.

She couldn't pretend anymore that life was going to go back to the way it had been before she'd opened her door to Flynn's towel-clad, panic-stricken presence.

*

"TELL ME a story, Mr. Flynn." This had become a nightly ritual. Ann moved quietly around the room putting away the day's accumulation of clothes and toys, while Flynn's voice spun a quiet story about elves and princesses.

The story was only half over when Flynn's voice stopped, and Ann turned to see that Becky had fallen asleep, her lashes making dark crescents against her flushed cheeks. Flynn eased himself off the bed and dropped a kiss on Becky's forehead. They tiptoed from the room, leaving the door open just a crack.

In the living room, the atmosphere was suddenly awkward. The two of them were seated on the thick carpeting in front of the fireplace. Huge pillows bolstered their backs. It was a warm, intimate setting and part of Ann couldn't believe that she was here, courting disaster like this.

She stared into the fireplace, afraid to look at Flynn, afraid to look too closely at what she was doing. Afraid to stay and even more afraid to go.

He didn't move, didn't speak until, at last, she could bear the tension no more. She turned her head. The flames cast shadows over his features, making it difficult to read his expression.

"You are so beautiful." His voice was husky, soft. His thumb brushed her earlobe and she shivered. Her

lips parted, anticipating, needing, wanting.

And then he was there.

His mouth claimed hers hungrily. Ann moaned low in her throat as her lips opened, welcoming the invasion of his tongue. He tasted of wine. He tasted of madness. He tasted of all the things she'd denied herself for so many years.

She was barely aware of his hands shifting to her shoulders, lowering her to the thick carpeting. Flynn's mouth slid down her throat, his tongue tasting the pulse that beat frantically at its base.

He was warm, so warm. She slid her hands up his chest, feeling the shudder that ran through him. For the first time, she realized the power of her femininity. It was a heady feeling. But she didn't have long to savor the feeling, because Flynn soon showed her that it worked both ways.

She opened dazed eyes as he stood up, bending to lift her in his arms. The fire continued to burn in the hearth, the flames lower now. Her eyes met Flynn's, reading the hunger that still burned in him.

He carried her easily, kicking the door of his bedroom shut behind them, reminding Ann that they were not alone in the apartment.

She stared at his chest as he shrugged out of the loosened shirt and let it fall to the floor. His fingers went to his belt buckle, and her eyelids fluttered.

He bent forward to kiss her and her mouth softened instantly. Need burned in him. When she at last lay naked beneath him, he thought he would surely explode with hunger.

Her hair spread like fiery silk across his pillow. And her eyes. Her eyes seemed to burn into his very soul.

His hands stroked her body, stroking the slumbering fires to new life. She arched beneath him, tangling her fingers in his hair.

The pleading tug of her hands stripped away the last of Flynn's fragile control. He slid his body over hers, feeling her stiffen and then melt as she felt the heat that burned in him.

He began to move, slowly, savoring the feel of her tight warmth. Ann matched his movements, gradually picking up the rhythm. The hunger had been building for so long that the fulfillment could not last long. Flynn felt the delicate contractions grip her body and he moaned a protest. He wanted it to last forever. Then his own climax took him, sending him spinning after her into a place where the only reality was each other.

The return to earth was slow. Flynn lifted his head, feeling as if the entire world had been rearranged in the last few minutes. Ann lay still beneath him, her body lax, her face utterly peaceful. He kissed her, tasting her satisfaction in the softness of her mouth.

He was pleased with the slightly glazed look in her eyes. She looked like a woman who'd been well and thoroughly loved.

He slid his arm beneath her shoulders, pulling her to his side. Ann's head snuggled into his shoulder, feeling so right that he wondered how he'd ever slept without her small body tucked against his.

SHE STOLE quick glances at Flynn, terrified that he would wake up before she could slip away. She couldn't face him right now. It was foolish, childish even, but she just needed to get away.

Once dressed, she hesitated for a moment. Part of her wanted to climb back into bed and wake him. She wanted to find out if it was possible to know the kind of pleasure she remembered from the night just past. Surely, she must have dreamed the total satisfaction she'd felt. She backed away, physically resisting temptation. She hurried from the room, carefully shutting the door behind her.

WHEN THE knock on the door came, Ann jumped, spilling milk on the counter. She'd known that she wouldn't be able to avoid Flynn forever. But she hadn't expected him to come knocking on her door when she'd been home from work less than twenty minutes.

He was going to want to talk about last night and she wasn't ready to talk about it. She wasn't sure she'd ever be ready. This was one problem she hadn't been able to put aside by going to work. It had nagged at the back of her mind all day, like an aching tooth that couldn't be ignored.

She pulled open the door to find Flynn's hand raised to knock a second time. All her carefully selected phrases flew out of her head when she saw his face.

He looked old and tired. Deep lines bracketed his mouth, and there was a dull hurt in his eyes. He was

far removed from the man she'd left sleeping only twelve hours ago.

"My God, Flynn. What's wrong?"

"They found Becky's mother. She's dead."

*

FLYNN HAD no idea what time it was when he came out of a light sleep, aware that something was wrong. He was surprised that he'd fallen asleep at all. After tucking Becky in once they'd told her about her mother, he and Ann had shared a glass of wine and then she'd gone back to her apartment, leaving instructions to call her if he needed her.

Looking in on Becky, he'd experienced a feeling of total unreality. She slept so peacefully, as if this night were no different than any other. Was death really such an abstract concept to a child that she didn't realize what it was going to mean in her life?

The sound that had awakened him came again and he slid out of bed and padded down the dim hallway. Pushing open Becky's door, the sound was clearer, easily identifiable. She was crying.

He crossed the room, easing himself onto the edge of her bed and gathering her shaking body into his arms. Her arms came up to circle his neck and she buried her face in the thin silk over his shoulder.

"Mama. I want Mama." The words were muffled by sobs but Flynn felt them like tiny knives in his heart. "Mama."

"I know you do, sweetheart. I know you do."

He had no idea how long she cried. He held her, rocking her, brushing the tangled hair back from her face, murmuring soothingly and wishing that there was something he could do to take her hurt away.

It had been one hell of a day.

"DR. PERRY to emergency please. Dr. Perry to emergency." The tinny voice echoed over the PA. The elevator was empty for once, and Ann allowed herself the luxury of leaning against one wall and closing her eyes. Her heart wasn't really in it these days. A part of her wondered if it ever had been. She was so tired. Tired of thinking, tired of trying to decide what was right, tired of worrying about what her father wanted. She wanted to get up and walk out of the hospital and never come back. She wanted to go home to Flynn and Becky and shut the door and not come out for a month.

What were they doing right now? Had they gone to the park? The new school year had started two weeks ago, but Ms. Davis had agreed that it might be best for Becky to stay home. It was a difficult time for her. Unspoken was the thought that, when they placed her in a foster home, she probably wouldn't be in the same school district that she was now, anyway. Flynn refused to talk about foster homes.

Flynn. Another subject she'd been avoiding examining. There were a lot of things she needed to think about. Like the direction her life was going; did she want to spend the rest of her life in medicine; and what would it be like to fall in love with Flynn McCallister?

The next afternoon, she was no closer to answering any of her own questions, but the questions themselves had been pushed aside by more pressing matters. Sitting on Flynn's sofa, she watched him pace back and forth across the living room, his strides full of coiled energy.

"Maybe Ms. Davis just wants to check and make sure Becky is all right."

Flynn shook his head. "She was here three days ago."

"Did she say anything then that might give you a clue?"

Before he could answer there was a knock on the door. Their eyes met, each wanting some reassurance that neither of them could give.

None of his feelings showed in his face as he opened the door. "Come in, Ms. Davis."

Flynn followed her into the living room, wishing that he could read something from her face. "Was there a problem with your visit Monday?"

"No problem at all, Mr. McCallister. I'm afraid I have some good and some bad news."

Flynn smiled slightly. "I've always had a healthy distrust of conversations that start out on that note."

"I'm afraid it won't be possible for you to adopt Becky, Mr. McCallister."

Flynn was aware of Ann's head jerking toward him. He should have told her what he had in mind. "I can't believe that my reputation is so bad that it would earn me an immediate rejection."

"It really has nothing to do with your reputation, Mr. McCallister."

He leaned forward, his eyes pinning her to her chair with their intensity. "What if I were to get married?"

His eyes shifted to Ann. She stared at him, feeling her own eyes widen with shock. He was suggesting that they marry for Becky's sake. It was amazing that he could even consider such a thing. She wanted him to want her for herself.

The thought was so stunning that Ann jerked her eyes away from his.

"Your bachelorhood really doesn't make any difference, Mr. McCallister. Becky's father has been located and he wants his child."

The words fell into a pool of silence, as if each were a small stone, sending out ripples as they hit the water.

"Her father?" Flynn's voice was dazed. "You're just going to hand her over to some flake who couldn't be bothered with her for the last three years?"

Ann wondered how Ms. Davis could be so calm. Flynn was a more than slightly intimidating figure.

"I understand your disappointment, and I would have given you my recommendation if Mr. Traherne hadn't turned up."

"Who's Mr. Traherne?"

"Becky's father."

"Traherne? Becky's last name is Sinclair. If this Traherne couldn't even be bothered to marry Becky's mother, how can he lay any legal claim to Becky?"

"They were married, Mr. McCallister. You see, three years ago Becky's mother left and took their

child with her. Mr. Traherne has been looking for both of them ever since. He's a doctor. The Traherne family has been in Denver for over seventy-five years and they are all respected members of the community. We feel that it's in the best interests of the child if she can be with her natural father."

Ms. Davis reached for her briefcase. "He should be here day after tomorrow."

Flynn's smile was strained as he stood up to show her to the door. He was losing Becky. The thought brought a hollow ache to his gut. And with Becky gone, what was going to happen to his relationship with Ann? Would Ann still want to be with him or was he going to lose her, too?

FLYNN AND Ann decided not to tell Becky about her father. If there was some mistake, there was no sense in getting her hopes up only to have them dashed. There'd been enough disappointments in her young life.

The day Becky's father was supposed to arrive, Ann stayed home from the hospital. Becky was playing on the balcony when Joe buzzed up from the lobby to say that Mr. Traherne was here. Flynn felt as if the world had come to a halt.

At six feet tall, Rafferty Traherne was built like a bulldozer. There was nothing here that reminded Ann of Becky's delicate bone structure. Nothing to show that he was related at all, until she looked into his eyes. They were the same clear gray as his daughter's. And they gave her that same feeling that they could look right into her soul.

She watched him sink into one of the living-room chairs. Like Flynn, he dominated the overstuffed piece of furniture without effort.

"What I'd really like to know is why your wife ran away. I've had Becky in my care for over a month now, and if you hadn't turned up, I was going to adopt her. The government may be satisfied with the fact that your name is on her birth certificate but, until I'm satisfied, Becky is staying right where she is."

Flynn was deliberately trying to antagonize the man. The two men stared at each other, weighing and measuring in some way that Ann couldn't follow. Whatever he saw apparently decided Rafferty in Flynn's favor. He nodded slowly.

"Maryanne was a very high-strung, very sweet girl. And I use the word 'girl' deliberately. She just didn't seem to know how to grow up. I thought maybe she'd grow up when Becky was born but she didn't. I'm not sure she ever really figured out that this wasn't a doll to play with." He was silent for a moment, lost in memories. He shrugged. "I wanted her to grow up and she wanted me to be a father figure. There was no middle ground.

"Maryanne...did something that she thought was going to make me very angry. She thought... Hell, I don't know what she thought. When I got home from work, she was gone and she'd taken Becky with her. I hired investigators but no one could turn up a trace of Maryanne or Becky. For all I knew, they were both dead, until I got the phone call from Ms. Davis."

Rafferty had told the story without fanfare or dramatics. But Ann had watched the way his fingers knotted over one another and she knew just how much it had cost him to dredge up the old memories. She looked at Flynn and could see that he was impressed despite himself.

"It's going to be awfully hard on Becky to just pack up and move. To her, you're a total stranger."

Rafferty nodded. "I know. She's just lost her mother. You two are the only security she knows right now." He thrust his fingers through his hair, tousling it into waves of gray. "I want to get to know my daughter again. You two know her a lot better than I do. What do you think would be the best way to tell her who I am?"

It was clearly not easy for him to ask for help. Flynn answered the pained question. "Becky's been through a lot lately. If we just drop it on her that her father has arrived, it's going to be pretty hard on her. You can stay here. It will give her a chance to get to know you without any pressure. We can tell her that you're a friend of mine." Flynn's offer was made without expression, and Rafferty studied him for a long moment before nodding slowly.

Ann allowed herself to relax for the first time since hearing of Rafferty's existence.

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IN THE last two weeks, Becky had come to adore Rafferty. Which was just as it should be. Flynn was doing what he could to loosen the ties between himself and Becky. It hurt but it had to be done. She needed to

transfer her dependence to her father. He was glad that she was doing so.

His eyes caught Ann's. They'd barely spoken since the night they made love. It seemed as if something was always taking priority. First there'd been the death of Becky's mother, then finding out about Rafferty and then Rafferty himself showing up. Their relationship had taken a giant step and had then been frozen in time.

Becky and Rafferty had gone to the movies, leaving Ann and Flynn in the quiet apartment. He didn't want to talk about Rafferty or Becky or the fact that soon they'd be going away. He wanted to pull Ann into his arms and feel her soften against him.

"Do you realize this is the first time we've been alone in three weeks?"

Awareness flickered through her eyes for a moment. He was so close that his breath stirred the hair that curled against her temples. Slowly her eyes came up to meet his.

"Flynn..." He stilled her whispered protest with a quick kiss, stealing away her voice.

"Stay with me tonight."

"I can't. I..." He kissed her again and she forgot what she'd planned to say.

"Stay with me. I just want to hold you."

She started to shake her head but his mouth stopped the movement. The kiss was longer this time. His mouth molded hers, stealing not only her breath, but the ability to think.

She wasn't quite sure how they'd gotten to the bedroom. Sometime

during that drugging kiss, he must have eased her in here. She didn't remember walking but he certainly hadn't carried her. He reached around her to turn down the covers on the bed.

She hesitated, aware that this was a crossroads in some way that she couldn't quite define.

Flynn waited. He could feel Ann's hesitation and he held his breath. He wouldn't pressure her but, if she walked away now, he felt as if something inside him would die. She looked up at him, her eyes bright green with questions he couldn't read, and then she turned and slid onto the bed.

He released his breath in a rush. He reached out, pulling her close, feeling complete for the first time in a very long time.

FLYNN CAME awake slowly, aware of feeling completely rested. He didn't have to open his eyes to know the source of his contentment. He kissed his way down her face, planting soft kisses at the corners of her eyes, on the tip of her nose, on the delicate skin just under her jaw. Her lips parted, inviting him.

Ann moaned against his mouth as his hand cupped her breast. The sleepy passion took on an edge of urgency, and Ann met him with demands of her own. All that mattered was touch.

Her legs parted, cradling him. His mouth caught hers, his tongue plunged inside at the same moment that he sheathed his aching hardness in the damp warmth of her body. He moved, feeling her body shift to accommodate his.

Ann shivered beneath him, her body contracting around him, and Flynn groaned; following her to the culmination of their passionate love.

Not a word had been spoken, but they communicated as fully as was humanly possible.

RAFFERTY woke suddenly, aware that he was no longer alone. He was lying on his stomach, his face near the edge of the bed. He opened his eyes to find Becky seated on the floor next to the bed. Clutched in her arms was the tattered brown giraffe he'd given her for her second birthday. Her eyes were wide and solemn on his face.

"Are you my daddy?" The question was so totally unexpected that Rafferty wondered if he was dreaming.

"Would you like it if I was your daddy?"

She shrugged. Her fingers twisted an ear on the battered stuffed toy. "How come you left me and Mama? How come you left us?"

He chose his words carefully, knowing that what he said now could affect their relationship for a very long time to come. "Your mother took you and she left. I looked for the two of you but I couldn't find you. I never stopped looking, Becky." He closed his eyes. "We used to have a lot of fun together when you were little. You probably don't remember much of that."

Her eyes flickered up at him. "You used to throw me up in the air. And sometimes you'd tell me a bedtime story. Only you'd read it out of a book. Your hair was all streaky. Not one color like it is now."

Rafferty ran his fingers through his iron gray hair. "When your mother left, my hair hadn't gone completely gray yet. It runs in my family, you know. Your grandfather's hair was gray by the time he was thirty."

"Grandfather? Do I have a grandfather?"

"Sure. And a grandmother, too. And you've got two aunts and three cousins."

Her eyes widened at this bounty of relatives. "All those?"

Rafferty's arms closed around her and he buried his face in her sandy hair. She smelled of soap and baby powder. His chest ached as her arms went around his neck. He'd lost so much time with her. Three years gone never to be regained. He'd never lose sight of how lucky he was to have her back with him.

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NO MATTER how quickly said, the goodbyes were still painful. Becky had been part of Flynn's life a relatively short time, but she'd wound herself deep into his emotions. It wasn't easy to say goodbye.

"Don't cry, Ann. You and Mr. Flynn will come see us soon, won't you?"

"You bet we will, urchin." Flynn crouched next to the little girl, his eyes going over her face. He ruffled her hair, keeping his smile tacked in place. He stood up and held out his hand to Rafferty. "Take care of her."

Ann's smile was shaky as she bent to hug Becky. "See you later, Becky."

Flynn's chest ached as the elevator door slid open. Rafferty stepped in but Becky tugged her hand loose from her father's and ran back.

Flynn dropped to one knee, catching her as she flew toward him, burying his face in her hair, breathing in all the sweet little girl smells that he'd grown to love.

"I love you, Mr. Flynn."

"I love you too, Becky." His voice broke on the words and he held her tighter. "I'll come and visit you soon. I promise."

He turned her around and gave her a gentle push toward Rafferty. She took two steps and then hesitated, looking back at him. He smiled, hoping she wouldn't notice the unnatural brightness of his eyes. She looked at him a moment longer, her gray eyes full of uncertainty and then turned and ran to her father. Rafferty caught her hand in his and stepped into the elevator. Flynn stood up, watching as the elevator doors slid shut, blinking rapidly against the burning in his eyes. Behind him, Ann sobbed quietly.

"I'm going to miss her so much." The words came out on a hiccupped sob and Flynn's heart twisted.

"I know, love." He pulled her head to his shoulder and Ann collapsed against him, one hand curling around the edge of his shirt.

She cried for a long time, crying out her grief over losing Becky, but also crying out the confusion that seemed to have taken over her life. Nothing fit into the neat patterns she'd devised for herself. Most of all, Flynn McCallister didn't fit into any pattern.

When she lay still against him, he brushed the tangled hair back from her face. He dropped a kiss on her flushed forehead, tilting her face back to place another kiss on her still-trembling mouth.

"I must look awful." It was a measure of her exhaustion that she didn't try to hide her tear-streaked face. "I guess I'll go home. Oscar probably thinks I've died."

Flynn felt a surge of panic. He had the feeling that, if she went home now, they might never find each other again.

"Dinner."

Ann looked up at him, startled by the way the word came at her so forcefully. "Dinner?"

"Dinner." He smiled crookedly. "I know a great restaurant where the lobster is slathered in butter. I'll call and see if I can get reservations."

THE EVENING seemed to have a fairy-tale quality to it. The table was tucked in a dimly lit corner. And Flynn's eyes couldn't seem to get enough of her.

"You should have ordered the lobster."

Ann cut into her beef, finding it meltingly tender. "It's impossible to eat lobster neatly and I don't want to end the evening with butter on my chest." She took a bite of beef and then looked up to find Flynn's eyes on the décolletage of her dress.

"I'm sure I could think of some way to get it off." His eyes swept up to hers, and Ann forgot how to chew.

Flynn dipped a bite of his entrée in butter and held it across the table to

her. "You can't possibly get butter on your dress this way."

Her teeth sank into the succulent white meat and she closed her eyes in ecstasy, savoring the buttery richness of it. When she opened her eyes, she found Flynn staring at her. The need she saw there made her feel like a siren.

"Once I get you home, I'm going to strip that sexy dress off of you a little at a time and I'm going to taste every single inch until you beg me to make love to you."

Though she knew the food was exquisite, Ann couldn't really say that she tasted much of it. All her attention was for the man across from her. They said very little during the meal, but she could feel the tension building to a boiling point.

They both refused dessert and Flynn paid the bill. He put his hand against the small of her back as they walked from the restaurant, and Ann wondered if the sparks that seemed to shoot from that light touch were visible to the other patrons.

Neither of them said a word on the drive home. The tension inside the low-slung sports car was so thick, it seemed to be almost breathable.

He carried her through the silent rooms to his bedroom, laying her on the bed and following her down, pinning her with the sensual weight of his body.

She couldn't have said if it were hours or days later when they at last fell asleep. She was conscious of nothing beyond the warmth of Flynn lying next to her, his ragged breathing slowly steadying. He'd kept every promise he'd made her in the restaurant.

THE NEXT morning, she opened her eyes and sat up, feeling more alive than she had ever felt before. She cocked her head, listening, but the apartment was quiet. Her clothes were neatly folded and stacked on a chair and she flushed, remembering how quickly they'd been discarded the night before. Lying on top of her silk slip was a folded piece of paper. She picked it up, feeling as quivery as a schoolgirl.

Ann,

Sorry I'm not here to kiss you awake but I'd probably end up making you late for work. I had to go out to my parents'. Some papers Dad needs me to sign. Let's have dinner again to-night. I'll pick you up at eight. Wear the green dress again. I had such fun peeling it off of you.

Love, Flynn

Ann hugged the note to her chest, her cheeks pink with the memory of their lovemaking the night before.

But, as the day wore on, some of the glow faded, to be replaced by a host of uncertainties. What was she getting into? Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined that she would be attracted to a man like Flynn McCallister. He'd been wonderful with Becky, but there was more to life than being kind to small children and animals. There was dedication and ambition and... Well, weren't dedication and ambition important enough? And he didn't have a trace of either one.

Ann Perry was a very practical woman who knew better than to think that love alone could support a marriage.

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HE TOOK her to another quiet restaurant. Flynn tasted the wine and nodded to the waiter before turning his full attention to Ann. "How was your day at work?"

"It was okay." She shrugged, feeling tension creeping into her shoulders.

He leaned back as the waiter set spinach salads down in front of them. "Do you ever think about what your life might have been like if you'd become a veterinarian?"

"No!" His eyes jerked to her face and Ann flushed, realizing how abrupt the word had sounded. "I mean, why would I? Being a doctor is important work." Ann picked at her salad. Why did the words ring so hollow? "How was your visit to your parents?"

"Pretty much the same as always. Dad wants me to take an active role in the corporation." He half laughed and, at another time, Ann might have heard the pain in the sound. "I don't know why he can't get it through his head that I'm not like Mark."

"I thought he was a police officer."

"He was, but Dad always figured Mark would quit the force and join the company after a few years, and he's probably right. But I've got a lousy head for business."

"Maybe it disappoints him that you don't have more ambition."

Ann pretended not to notice the way Flynn's eyes widened at her tone.

"We can't all be ambitious. I'm content."

"Are you?" She was suddenly brimming with anger and frustration.

Flynn half laughed. "Why do I have the feeling that I've done something to upset you? Is it my tie?"

"You can joke all you want, but you're wasting your life and you're wasting your talents."

His mouth tightened. "Where the hell is this coming from? You be ambitious and I won't be and we'll do just fine."

"It just seems to me that you're a little old to still be defying 'Daddy.'"

"I beg your pardon." The tone was icy.

She gestured angrily. "Isn't it time to grow up?"

Flynn's knuckles whitened around the delicate stem of the wineglass. "At least I haven't let my entire life be run by my father like you have. Sleeping with me is probably the first thing you've ever done that you didn't ask Daddy's permission for. Or did you call and check it out with him first?"

The crack of her hand against his cheek echoed in the quiet room. Ann drew her hand back, pressing it against her mouth, her horrified eyes on the red imprint of her palm. "Oh, my God."

There was a sharp ping and she looked down to see that the stem of his wineglass had snapped in his fingers.

Flynn raised his hand to the waiter, who was staring at them in stunned silence.

"The lady and I will not be dining tonight after all. Please tell Mike to put the meal on my tab."

Seconds later, he was sitting beside Ann and the car's engine growled as he pulled away from the curb.

"Flynn—"

"Don't. Just forget it."

There was such command in the simple words that Ann subsided into her seat.

The car came to a halt outside their building. She glanced at Flynn but his eyes were focused on the windshield. "If you didn't bring your key, Joe can let you in."

He didn't look at her. It was as if, in his mind, she'd already ceased to exist.

THE NEXT few days were an exercise in torture. Ann could not stop going over the disastrous evening in her mind. The events replayed themselves like a broken record: each word, each gesture, had to be taken out and examined again and again.

She'd deliberately set out to pick a fight with Flynn. There was no other possible explanation. She'd been looking for a reason to break off their relationship, looking for some terrible flaw in him. She'd found a flaw, but it was in herself, not in Flynn.

She saw him twice in passing over the next three days. Each time she ached with the need to say something—anything—to break through the terrible wall that lay between them. But she said nothing, did

nothing. Just looking at him seemed to paralyze her vocal cords.

A week after the disastrous dinner date, her father came to see her.

"I understand that little girl McCallister was keeping is gone now." Robert Perry leaned back in his chair and sipped at the coffee his daughter had just handed him. "Best for all concerned. Gets McCallister out of your life, lets you concentrate on your career."

Ann sipped her coffee, trying not to be irritated by the cavalier way he dismissed Becky. She set her cup down with careful deliberation. "Actually, I've been thinking about giving up my practice and going back to school to be a veterinarian." The words could not have had stronger results if she'd just announced that she was going to become a terrorist.

"Veterinarian!" He made the word sound like an obscenity. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Dad, I'm not happy with my work." Her tone pleaded with him to understand.

"I forbid it! Do you think I spent all that money for your schooling just to watch you throw it all away on a whim?"

"This isn't a whim. I think this will make me happy."

"Happy? Life is about getting somewhere, accomplishing things, making something of yourself. It's McCallister, isn't it? He's filled your head with a lot of twaddle. What's he accomplished in his life? Look at him. Nobody respects him."

"I respect him."

"I should never have let you move in here."

Ann stared at him. "Dad, can't you hear what I'm saying? This has nothing to do with Flynn, though he's the one who made me see how foolish it is to waste my life. *I'm not happy.*"

"I can't be proud of someone who's wasting their time on a bunch of filthy animals."

He glared at her, and Ann looked at him over an abyss so vast that there was no crossing it.

"You don't care about me at all, do you?"

"Don't be melodramatic." He stood up. "When you've calmed down, you'll see that I'm right about this."

"I don't think so."

She listened to the door close behind him and waited for all the pain to come crashing down on her. But the only feeling that emerged was a tremendous relief. The turmoil of the past few weeks was suddenly gone. She knew exactly what she wanted out of life.

And the first step was to find Flynn. Nothing else in her life could be right until he was back in it. Flynn was the key to everything. Why hadn't she seen that from the start?

She knocked on Flynn's door and waited impatiently for him to answer. He would understand. He had to understand.

She knocked again, waiting for a long time before finally admitting that he wasn't home. She leaned her forehead against his door.

"I've got it all straightened out now, Flynn. Where are you?" The whisper went unanswered.

THE RAIN poured down with steady persistence. It was after one o'clock in the morning. She'd been knocking on Flynn's door every half hour since eight.

She'd built a fire earlier but it was down to embers now. Ann leaned her head back, closing her eyes. She had to talk to Flynn. It couldn't be too late for them. It just couldn't.

She had no idea how much later it was when she was startled upright. Ann stumbled to her feet, groggy and disoriented. She pulled the door open and all her thoughts shifted into instant focus.

Flynn stood outside. A Flynn she'd never seen before. The brilliant blue of his eyes was dulled to steely gray. His skin looked pale and his face seemed much older than his years. He looked like a man who'd seen the death of all his dreams and had nothing left inside. He looked absolutely shattered.

His mouth quirked in a frail ghost of a smile. "I... didn't know where else to go." His voice was hollow, lost. Ann felt as if her heart were breaking.

ANN HAD made coffee and sandwiches and thrown enough logs on the fire to create a roaring blaze. There was still that rather frightening emptiness at the back of his eyes but his skin was not quite so gaunt.

"What happened?"

Flynn had been staring into the flames and it was a moment before he dragged his gaze to her.

"My father and I had a fight."

Ann waited, but he settled back against the cushions and stared into the fire.

"I suppose we quarreled about you, indirectly." He spoke so abruptly that Ann jumped.

"Me? What about me?"

"He thinks you were smart to get rid of me. He agrees with your opinions. He thinks I'm worthless."

"Flynn, I didn't mean those things I said." Her fingers knotted around her cup.

He glanced at her. His smile sweet. "I knew you didn't mean it. Not like he meant it."

"Flynn, what did your father say to you?"

"It wasn't what he said to me. It's what I said to him." His mouth twisted bitterly, his eyes on the fire. "I broke a promise. I did it because I was hurt. Not a very good reason. He started telling me how, if Mark had lived, Mark would have given him a grandson by now." He stood up, staring down into the flames. "I told him that wasn't likely. It's the truth but, God help me, I had no right to say it."

He turned his head to look at her and she almost cried out at the self-loathing in his eyes. "Mark was gay. Tonight, I blurted his secret out like a child. Just because I was hurt. My father called me a bastard. I can't even blame him." He put his head down, resting his forehead on his arm, his shoulders slumped in absolute defeat.

Ann got up and went to him. All the hurt that lay between them was forgotten. This was the man she loved and he was in pain.

~~"I'm sure Mark would understand. And your father will come around. Just give him some time. He~~

was hurt and shocked, but he'll come around."

He turned suddenly, his arms going around her, clutching her.

Ann felt the dampness of his tears on her neck and her arms tightened. She didn't know how long it was before he moved. He backed away. His eyes looked anywhere but at her.

"It's late. I should go home."

It was Ann's turn to look away. "You could stay."

The silence seemed to stretch out endlessly.

"I'd like that."

Ann let out her breath in a rush, only then aware that she'd been holding it.

She knew what she had to offer him. An unconditional love. Someone who accepted him with all his faults and all his good points. Someone who'd never compare him to another and find him wanting.

Someone who'd love him just as he was.

HE WAS standing in the kitchen doorway the next morning and she couldn't imagine how it was possible for a man to look so gorgeous.

"I love you."

Her head jerked up, her eyes meeting his. "Oh God." She slumped back against the counter, her knees shaking.

His brows shot up. "Oh God?" He was across the kitchen in an instant, his arms going around her, holding her close.

"Do you love me or do I go jump off the balcony?"

"I love you." His arms tightened, drawing a squeak of protest from her.

"I still don't have any ambition."

"That's okay. I've got enough for both of us."

His hand slid into her hair, tilting her head back. She smiled at him, her eyes sparkling through a film of tears as his mouth came down on hers.

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FLYNN PICKED his way through the turmoil of packing boxes until he reached her side. He crouched in front of her, reaching up to tuck a stray lock of hair beneath the scarf she was wearing.

"Rafferty called," she told him. "He says he's got all the real estate ads marked for us. Becky's looking forward to helping us pick out a house."

"Are you sure this is what you want to do? We're making a lot of changes all at once. You quitting your job, moving to a new state, trying to get into school and having a baby. It's a lot to take on."

She smiled at him, feeling contentment fill her. A year of marriage hadn't softened the intensity of their love. He'd supported her through the difficult decision to leave her job and apply to a school of veterinary medicine. He'd stood by her when her father all but said she was no daughter of his. When Flynn found out that the school she wanted to go to was in Colorado, he'd suggested that they move there, confident that she would be accepted. He believed in her more than she believed in herself.

"I love you, Flynn McCallister."

"I love you, too."

She watched him move over to the box she'd been packing and start wrapping the china in tissue.

A knock came at the door. She started to get to her feet but Flynn waved her back.

A minute later her eyes widened as Flynn stepped into the living room with his parents. Not just his mother, who had visited them on a number of occasions, but his father, too.

Ann came forward, holding out her hands. "Louise. David. How nice to see you." She looked at her husband, but Flynn was looking at one of the packing boxes. She could see the muscle that ticked in the side of his jaw.

The two women sat on the sofa and the men remained standing. David cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Your mother tells me that you and Flynn are going to be having a child."

"Yes, we are."

"That's wonderful. Wonderful."

David took his hands out of his pockets and stared at them for a moment. "You're... ah... moving to Colorado, I understand."

"That's right." Flynn would have left it at that but he caught Ann's eyes, reading the plea in them. "Ann's going to be going to school there."

"Good. Good." The silence stretched again. "We... ah... that is, your mother and I thought we'd like to maybe help out with the... house. We... that is... I didn't get you a wedding present and it would mean a lot to us if you were to consider the house a wedding gift."

Ann held her breath, waiting for Flynn's answer. He had to see how

difficult this was for his father. Surely, he wouldn't turn him away. Flynn glanced at her and then looked at his father.

"Thank you. Ann and I would be happy to accept your gift."

Ann let her breath out in a rush, feeling Louise do the same next to her. "Thank you, David. The house will mean even more to us, knowing that it comes from the two of you." David McCallister shifted uneasily beneath the warmth of her words.

"You know, Flynn, you've got a real treasure here."

Flynn's face relaxed in a half smile. "I know."

"Your mother tells me that you're quite a photographer. I never knew that. She says you've even submitted some things to a few magazines."

"That was Ann's doing. She can be pretty stubborn." His smile was so loving that Ann had to swallow the lump in her throat.

"Well, good luck with them. I'm... I'm proud of you, son."

Flynn's eyes widened as he stared at his father. "Thank you..." The two men stared at each other across the years, across a lot of hurts. "It means a lot to me to hear you say that."

Ann sniffed, unashamed of the tears that filled her eyes.

Ann didn't urge them to stay. At the door, she hugged Louise tightly and then hesitated a moment before putting her arms around her father-in-law's stocky figure.

Flynn hugged his mother and then faced his father. After a moment, David held out his hand and Flynn

He had to see how

More was said in the fer-

veny of their grips than could have been said with words.

"Keep in touch, Flynn. Losing one son in a lifetime is enough for any man." He was gone before Flynn could reply.

Flynn stared at the door for a moment and then turned to see Ann watching him, tears running down

her face. He held out his arms and she stepped into them.

"I love you so much." His voice broke on the words and he buried his face in her hair.

Her arms tightened around his waist. As long as she had him to hold on to, everything in her life was right.





**PHYLLIS
HALLDORSON**
If Ever I Loved You



Seven years ago he'd said he wouldn't take her
if she was the only woman on earth. Now he'd
send them both to hell and back to hold Gina to
her marriage vows.

Gina's nails dug into her palms as she rose with the hundred other guests and turned to watch the glowing young bride. For the past seven years Gina had used any excuse, truthful or not, to avoid attending weddings, but this time there had been no escape. Stewart, the strong, gentle man whose engagement diamond she wore, would never have understood her refusal to attend the marriage of Cindy, his only daughter. He didn't know that seven years ago, at the age of eighteen, Gina had also walked down the flower-strewn aisle of a fashionable church here in San Francisco on the arm of her father. The man waiting for her at the altar, Peter Van Housen, was the youngest son of one of the most wealthy and prestigious families in the Bay Area.

A wave of pain washed over Gina as she thought of her own annulment and the agony that surrounded it, and she clutched the back of the pew ahead of her to steady herself.

She felt a warm, soft hand cover hers and looked up to see Twyla Sisson standing next to her, a look of concern on her round, pretty face. "Gina, are you all right?" she whispered. "You're white as a ghost."

Gina managed a weak smile. "I'm okay."

Twyla didn't look convinced.

Gina heard the vows from her own wedding. "Do you, Virginia, take this man, Peter—?"

Oh, yes, she most definitely had taken Peter Van Housen to be her lawfully wedded husband. They'd known each other less than six weeks when, over the objections of both sets of parents, they'd exchanged their wedding vows in front of San Francisco's wealthiest, most socially prominent citizens.

Four hours later her marriage and her world lay shattered at her feet.

Cindy and her groom, Bob, their faces glowing with excitement, were coming back up the aisle as Gina fumbled blindly in her purse for a handkerchief. After seven years she could still shed tears over Peter Van Housen! What an idiot she was.

There was still the reception to get through, and that might prove to be the hardest part of all. She shuddered slightly and wondered how long it would be before she could slip quietly to the room Stewart had reserved for Twyla and her. The room where she could escape to tend to her wounds in private.

THE BANQUET room was filled with wedding guests. Gina hugged Cindy and Bob and kissed Stewart lightly on the cheek.

A uniformed waiter handed her a glass of champagne. She wandered over to the glass wall that held a view

of the ocean, and her memories were poignant and bittersweet. She became aware of a tightening at the base of her skull, as though someone was blowing lightly on her neck, making the short hairs stand up. She turned and scanned the room, but no one was staring at her, and she mentally chided herself.

She'd been drinking champagne on an empty stomach and needed to eat something. Gina piled her plate with steaming, succulent gourmet food and carried it to a table where Twyla was sitting.

Twyla lowered the filled fork. "I solemnly swear to go back on my diet tomorrow."

Gina laughed as she took the seat beside her.

The evening seemed to drag on interminably. Stewart was being photographed with the bridal party, and Gina, standing alone watching the proceedings, again had the feeling that someone was watching her. She accepted another crystal glass of champagne from one of the ever-vigilant waiters and headed for the balcony. She needed to get hold of herself.

The soft breeze from the ocean was chilly on her bare arms as she gazed out into the darkness.

She failed to hear the footsteps of the approaching man. Although the voice that spoke to her back was little more than a whisper she recognized it immediately.

"Hello, Ginny Lea."

Just three words. A shock of such magnitude tore through her that the expensive glass slipped from her fingers and splintered on the tiles at her

feet. She jerked awkwardly as she turned.

Her gaze started at the firm jawline, moved upward to the full, sensual mouth, the nose with the slight bump where it had once been broken and finally came to rest in the deep blue eyes of her ex-husband, Peter Van Housen!

She felt the color drain from her face. She would have fallen except for the arms that enfolded her against the familiar chest. The musky smell of him assailed her nostrils, and the finely spun wool of his blue suit coat rubbed against her cheek. His arms tightened as he buried his face in her black, feathered hair.

"What's going on here?"

The sound of Stewart's voice brought Gina back to reality, and she pulled swiftly away from Peter, then swayed as another wave of dizziness overcame her. This time it was Stewart who held her.

"Sweetheart," he said, "are you sick?"

Before she could answer, Twyla's voice sounded from her side. "She was ill during the wedding ceremony. I think we'd better get her upstairs."

Stewart swept her up in his arms and strode with her toward the elevator, leaving Peter standing there watching, his face shadowed and inscrutable.

Upstairs, Stewart put Gina gently on the bed and then reluctantly yielded to Twyla's demand that he go back down to his daughter's wedding reception and let Gina rest.

Twyla closed and locked the door behind him, then turned and leaned against it as her glance sought Gina's. "Okay, baby, tell mama all about it."

Gina's eyes widened with surprise. "All—all about what?" she stammered.

Twyla strolled across the room. "You're no more sick than I am. Something has shocked you right out of your mind and I want to know what it is. What happened that is still so painful that you can't face it?"

For a minute the room was so still that Gina could hear the almost-silent hum of the electric clock that sat on the bookcase in the headboard.

Gina took a deep breath. "I got married."

"Married!" Twyla gasped.

Gina nodded. "Yes, in a ceremony very much like the one today." Gina felt the tension rising in her again. "The marriage was made in heaven at high noon and ended in hell four hours later. It was annulled without ever being consummated."

"Good heavens!" Twyla's brown eyes were wide with astonishment.

Gina sighed. "I was eighteen, enrolled in the fine arts program, and I was going to be the world's first female Michelangelo. Instead I met Peter Van Housen."

"Peter Van Housen!" Twyla all but screamed. "You mean *the* Peter Van Housen, director of the most prestigious private art gallery in the Bay Area?"

Gina nodded. "The same. Only then he was just the youngest son of Hans Van Housen, millionaire fi-

nancier and art fancier. Their art collection was housed in their mansion in the Seacliff area and was viewed only by invitation. I understand they built the new gallery on Maiden Lane and opened it to the public about three years later. I met Peter when my art class took a tour of the famed Van Housen art collection. So help me, it was a classic case of love at first sight."

Gina gave a short, mirthless laugh. "Oh, how trusting are the young! By nightfall the whole direction of my life had changed. We were together every spare minute."

"Now wait a minute," interrupted Twyla. "Surely it wasn't as idyllic as all that."

"Idyllic?" murmured Gina. "Of course not. Mom and Dad tried to tell me that I was way out of my league. The Van Housens treated me like a mongrel pup their spoiled son had brought home. They had plans for their young son to marry Veronica, the daughter of State Senator Frederick Miller. They assumed Peter was having a last fling with one of the local peasantry before settling down to marriage and family life."

"And was he?" Twyla said.

Gina sniffed. "No. I was convinced that it was wrong to go to bed with a man before the wedding vows and until I met Peter it had never been a problem. None of the boys I'd gone out with had attracted me in that way, although Mel was beginning to make some headway."

"Who's Mel?" questioned Twyla.

"Melvin Calicutt, a photography student whom I had been dating before I met Peter."

Twyla was watching her closely. "So you didn't sleep with Peter before the wedding?"

Gina winced and closed her eyes. "No," she said. "And I was too young, naive, and blindly in love to understand that he was only marrying me because he couldn't get me in bed any other way."

Twyla gasped. "Oh, come now, Gina, you can't really believe that! If a man like Peter Van Housen married you over the objections of both sets of parents, then I'm betting that he loved you."

Gina covered her face with her hands. "In the end his parents grudgingly withdrew their opposition and insisted that if there was going to be a wedding it would be the social event of the season. All I wanted was to get it over with so Peter and I could make love."

"Gina," Twyla said, "I want to know why this marriage ended after only four hours."

Gina took a deep breath. "The reception was held at the Van Housen mansion. It seemed to go on forever, but finally most of the guests left. We were coming down the winding stairway when the doorbell rang and a man insisted on seeing Peter."

"He turned out to be a special messenger with a large brown manila envelope for Peter. He was very upset, said the envelope was to have been delivered before noon, but he'd been involved in a three-car pileup on one of the bridges and was delayed more than three hours. The messenger stressed that he'd been told the parcel was extremely impor-

tant, so Peter excused us and led me into the den where we could have some privacy while he examined the contents."

Gina twisted uncomfortably, fighting the memories that threatened to overpower her.

"I didn't immediately notice his startled reaction as he removed the contents of the envelope. When I finally became aware of the prolonged silence I looked up. What I saw in his face made me gasp. Those cold dead eyes seemed to bore into my very soul. A photograph fluttered to the desk and a look of rage replaced the shock. He said, 'So my parents and Veronica were right, all you wanted from me was money and prestige. You lying, cheating little—!' He shook me until I was sure my neck would snap, and I screamed. He released me so quickly that I fell to the floor. I lay there stunned as he strode across the room and unlocked the door, then disappeared down the hall."

Gina hugged her arms across her chest. "It was several minutes before I remembered the photograph. I picked it up and looked at it. It was an eight-by-ten glossy black-and-white portrait of Mel Calicutt and me. Mel's chest and arms were bare, and I was wearing a black bra with straps that were sliding off my shoulders. We were in what appeared to be a passionately erotic embrace!"

Twyla's husky voice broke the silence. "Well, was the picture faked?"

Gina turned to look at Twyla.

"Mel and I were in the same photography class. About a week before the wedding our teacher made arrangements for us to go to an estate in Marin County to photograph the inside of the fabulous home. He told us to bring our bathing suits. About mid-afternoon I changed into the new black bikini I'd bought for my trousseau. Mel led me around behind a huge tropical plant. Suddenly he grabbed me and kissed me. Then he apologized. When I saw the picture I realized someone must have photographed us in that impromptu embrace. The look on my face, which was really surprise, photographed as wanton passion."

Twyla's voice was questioning as she spoke. "But surely you could have explained that to Peter."

Gina shrugged. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? Unfortunately there was also a note enclosed with the picture. It said, 'Thought you should know what your sweet, virginal bride-to-be is doing when you're not around.'"

"That's rotten!" exploded Twyla.

"I was so sure that if Peter would just go with me to talk to Mel everything would be all right. We showed Mel the picture and the note. He looked at them, then at me, and I can quote his exact words. He said, 'Sorry, sweetheart, I had no idea we were being observed on that secluded stretch of beach. We should have been more careful, but surely Peter knows we've been—uh—going together.'"

Twyla gripped the arms of her chair. "That bastard!"

"Agreed," said Gina. "Peter hit him and slammed out of the apartment. I was wildly hysterical. Mel admitted what he'd done. He said that Veronica Miller, the woman who had thought she was going to marry Peter, had found out about Mel's heavy gambling debts and offered to pay them if he would arrange to have an incriminating picture made of the two of us. A messenger would then deliver it to Peter just before the wedding. Unfortunately for Veronica the messenger was delayed, but she accomplished her purpose. A few days later Peter's lawyer came to me with papers to sign agreeing to an annulment."

Gina slumped down on the side of her bed. The sobs could no longer be held back. Twyla jumped up and knelt before her. She wrapped her arms around Gina and rocked her back and forth. "Gina, honey," she soothed, "do you still love Peter so much?"

Gina's voice was racked with sobs as she wailed, "I—I *hate* him, and I hope I—I never see him again as—*as* long as I live."

MONDAY morning dawned bright and warm in the renowned artist colony of Mendocino. Gina plugged in the automatic coffeemaker. Before long she would have to go downstairs and open her gallery, known simply as "Gina's."

She was rummaging through the aging refrigerator looking for an orange when the doorbell chimed.

"Just a minute," she called as she hurried to the door.

Her breath caught in her throat as she stared at the tall blond man who stood on the landing.

"May I come in?" he asked in a husky, sensuous voice that always had sent shivers down her spine.

He walked into the living room without waiting to be directed, and as she followed behind she wondered if her trembling legs would continue to hold her up. She took a deep breath and hoped her voice wouldn't quiver as she said, "Why are you here, Peter?"

He raised a dark brown eyebrow. "Surely you aren't going to tell me you weren't expecting me."

She tried again. "I suppose Stewart told you where I live?"

"Well, I sure as hell didn't find out from you!" he exploded. "Where have you been for the last seven years, Ginny Lea?"

So there was some emotion under that cold exterior. He might be human after all. "Maryland. I graduated from the university there four years later and was offered a job here in Mendocino. I came and stayed."

He glared at her. "You mean you've been here for three years?" he said gratingly.

She nodded.

"You must not have lived with Mel long."

"I haven't seen Mel since the day you and I went to talk to him," she said simply.

There was emotion in his face now. It was disbelief tinged with disgust. "Don't lie to me," he snapped. "I returned to San Francisco a few weeks after the wedding

and both you and Mel were gone. I was told you'd left together."

It didn't take much imagination to know who told him that! "It doesn't matter to me anymore what you believe, Peter. Did you just come here to torment me?"

"Torment you!" he hissed. "I couldn't even begin to dish out the kind of torment you seem to have mastered." He nearly toppled his chair as he stood.

He stood there for a moment, tense and silent. He turned toward her. "When are you planning to be married?"

There was an undercurrent to his tone, and Gina stiffened. "We—we haven't set a date yet."

"Why aren't you living with him?"

"That's none of your business!" she rasped.

His hands gripped her shoulders. "The hell it isn't!" he shouted. "You married *me*, remember?"

The nerve of him! She pushed against his chest. "That was never a marriage and you know it! Go home to your wife and leave me alone!"

A look of surprise crossed his face. "Wife?"

She tried to pull away but he held her firm. "Did you think I hadn't heard that you married Veronica after the annulment?"

All emotion drained from his features and they settled into an impenetrable mask. "Veronica's dead," he said coldly. "She was killed two years ago in a skiing accident in Switzerland."

A wave of horror swept through Gina. In an instinctive gesture she

reached up and touched his cheek. "Oh, Peter, I'm so sorry."

His arms encircled her waist. For a long moment they stood silently embracing. She could feel his heart beating in rhythm with her own.

Peter was the first to break the spell. "Why didn't you answer my letters, Ginny Lea?"

She pushed away from him and this time he let her go. "What letters?"

Peter's light skin flushed darkly and his fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. "I not only wrote to you once, but after a couple of weeks, when I received no reply, I wrote again. Now don't try to tell me you didn't get either letter."

Gina sank wearily down on the chair. "This is getting us nowhere, Peter," she said tonelessly. "Please, just leave."

Peter hunkered down in front of her and put a hand on either side of her waist. His blue eyes looked deeply into her violet ones. "But I can't leave you alone, Ginny Lea," he murmured roughly.

His mouth covered hers in a hard, punishing kiss. Her body ignited like dry straw under a torch, and it was as if it had been years ago, only more so.

His breath was coming in short rasping pants when he stood and looked down at her bewildered upturned face.

"Oh, no, Ginny Lea," he said, "I can't leave you alone because you belong to me. I never filed those annulment papers. Like it or not you're still my wife and you can forget any

plans you've made to marry Stewart Tobias!"

She closed her eyes for a moment in an effort to ease the pounding in her head and regain her composure, then turned to face Peter Van Housen.

"How could you marry Veronica if you were still married to me?"

His eyes narrowed. "I didn't. I spent a lot of time in Europe and so did Veronica, and once in a while we'd run into each other. I don't know how the rumor got started that we were married."

Gina was appalled at the feeling of relief that swept over her, relief that Peter had never married anyone else. Why should she care? He was nothing to her anymore. Nothing, that is, but an obstacle to her own marriage plans.

She jumped guiltily. "Are you going to file for the annulment or shall I contact a lawyer tomorrow?"

He shook his head. "If you petition for an annulment I'll swear that the marriage was consummated."

Shock tore through Gina. "You must be out of your mind," she said gratingly.

"That's very possible," he agreed quite seriously. "After what you did to me, what you've put me through, it's surprising if I've retained any sanity at all." His eyes narrowed. "Are you in love with Stewart, Gina?" he asked coldly.

"Of—of course," she answered, shaken by his unexpected query. "I wouldn't have agreed to marry him if I wasn't."

"You agreed to marry me and all the time you were sleeping with Mel Calicutt," he accused.

Her breath caught in her throat as she said, "Go ahead and cling to those misconceptions you've nourished so carefully all these years, but give me my freedom so I can marry the man who loves and trusts me."

In a surprise movement he took her in his arms and kissed her. "Don't hate me, Gina," he pleaded thickly.

Before she could react he released her and bounded out the door and down the stairs to his car.

*

"GINA!" Stewart gasped and rose from his chair. "What are you doing here?"

They met in the middle of the room and embraced, but Stewart's kiss had an absent quality about it. It was the kiss of an author interrupted at his work who hadn't quite made it back to the real world yet. He glanced a little regretfully at the room before he said, "I really wish you'd phoned before you came, sweetheart. When I'm writing neither the house nor I are fit to be seen by anybody."

He led Gina to the brown leather sofa and cleared several magazines, books and a dirty sweatshirt off it, before motioning her to sit down.

"I'm sorry, Stewart," she began. "I know you don't like to be interrupted when you're working and ordinarily I wouldn't dream of just walking in on you this way, but I—I had to see you." She took a deep breath. "I have something to tell

you. I should have told you months ago, but I had no idea there would be so many—so many ramifications."

Stewart looked at her questioningly.

"When I was eighteen I married Peter Van Housen," she blurted.

Stewart blanched. "You what?"

The words poured out and she told the story much as she had told it to Twyla. She watched Stewart, wanting to gauge the hurt she was inflicting. Except for a muttered oath now and then, he made no comment.

"I'll take care of Peter Van Housen," he muttered grimly when she stopped talking.

"You don't understand, Stewart." She started to walk restlessly away from the couch, and clenched her fists as she continued, "He says that he never filed those annulment papers. He says we're still married. That I'm still his wife!"

Gina watched the blood drain from his face as he stared at her. Stewart rose from the couch and swore with an earthiness Gina had never heard him use before. His large frame filled the small room as he started to pace. "Well, that's an oversight we can take care of in a hurry. I know a lawyer who can get started on the annulment immediately."

Gina caught him by the arm and said, "No, Stewart. Peter—he—he said if I filed for an annulment he would swear the marriage was consummated."

Stewart glared at her. "And was it?" he grated.

Gina winced. "Of course not."

Stewart's gaze searched her face, then with a muffled groan he took her in his arms and held her close. "I'm sorry," he murmured shakily.

She shuddered and burrowed closer into Stewart's arms. For several minutes she enjoyed the warm security of Stewart's firm, hard body, but then she sighed and pulled back to look at him. "Since Peter won't consent to an annulment I want a divorce," she said.

Stewart nodded. "That will take longer, but apparently it's the only solution."

SHE WAS IN the storage room at the back of the shop when she heard footsteps on the hardwood floor. She looked over her shoulder and her heart jumped. She spun around and was face-to-face with the thunderous countenance of Peter Van Housen.

"What are you doing here?"

He grasped her shoulders roughly. "I can't turn my back on you for a minute, can I?" he muttered furiously.

With a suddenness that took her totally off guard he pulled her against him and kissed her. Before she could attempt to break away from him one of his hands began a languorous trail down her spine. She shivered as unbidden sensations surged through her.

His lips explored her face, her eyes, her cheeks, the corners of her mouth. He nuzzled the sensitive hollow at the side of her neck, and the sensations became pinpricks of fire. His mouth again sought hers.

She pushed away, horrified by her surrender. There was a look of triumph on his face as his gaze slid over her swollen lips and her wide violet eyes, still clouded with passion.

"Now tell me you want to divorce me and marry Stewart Tobias," he said. His eyes were as cold as blue ice. "Did you really think I'd give you a divorce after I'd refused to consent to an annulment?"

"You swine!" she hissed through clenched teeth. "Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?"

The only sign that he was not totally relaxed was the deepening lines of strain around his mouth. "I want the same thing any man wants from his wife—a companion, a lover, a mother for my children."

Gina stared at him. "You're out of your mind!" she screamed. "Seven years ago you told me you wouldn't touch me if I were the only woman on earth. Now you refuse to terminate the marriage. Why? Surely you're not going to try to tell me you love me!"

"Love!" he spat out, as though it were a dirty word. "No, I'm not telling you I love you. But I'm still physically attracted to you, as you are to me."

She drew in her breath sharply and turned away from him as he continued to talk. "I'm thirty-three years old. I want to settle down with a wife and start a family, and since I'm already married to you I see no reason to delay."

Gina was stunned. Surely he didn't really believe that she could live like that.

She straightened her shoulders and turned to look at him. "I'm surprised at you, Peter," she said as she strove to sound calm and a little disdainful. "Aren't you afraid I might revert to my old ways and take lovers on the side?" she taunted.

She thought she saw him wince, but if so he checked it quickly and forced a grin that was more of a grimace. "I intend to keep you too—satisfied—to have the urge or the energy for anybody but me."

Something inside Gina seemed to shrivel. "I'll see you in hell first."

His hands gripped her shoulders and pulled her back against the long length of him. "Then you'd better dress in something cool because you'll be there a long time," he murmured softly. "I have the best attorneys in the West and they can delay this dissolution hearing indefinitely." His fingers tightened. "Meanwhile stay out of Stewart Tobias's bed. I won't have my wife sleeping with another man."

He released her suddenly and walked out.

STEWART was a loving and sensitive man, and she would hurt him far more by marrying him than she would by making a clean break of it now. Gina cringed at the thought of what she must do, but it couldn't be put off.

Gina poured them each double portions of Scotch over ice. Stewart raised one speculative eyebrow and grinned. "What are you trying to do, sweetheart, get us both bombed? After all that wine with dinner and now this, I may wind up sleeping on

your couch tonight. That is, unless you'd rather I shared your bed."

Gina sat down at the other end of the couch from him. "I have to talk to you, Stewart," she said.

His teasing tone immediately vanished and he looked at her with a wariness he made no attempt to hide.

Before she could lose her nerve Gina removed the stunning diamond ring from the third finger of her left hand. "I—I can't marry you. I'm sorry."

"It's Peter Van Housen, isn't it?"

She looked away. "I—I'm married to him and he's contesting the divorce."

Stewart took a gulp of whiskey. "I can hire lawyers who are just as smart as his."

She gripped the ring in her fist. "I can't let you do that."

Again there was silence, broken at last by Stewart's voice, tender this time. "Are you still in love with him?"

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. She saw it then, the sharp stab of agony that flicked across his face. "Oh, Stewart," she moaned softly. "I'm so sorry. I didn't want to hurt you this way." The tears she'd been fighting to hold back brimmed over and spilled down her cheeks.

He fumbled in his back pocket and handed her a white linen handkerchief. "Don't cry for me, Gina," he said as he lifted her away from him. "Save your tears. You're going to need them for yourself if you let Peter Van Housen back in your life again."

He turned toward her then and put his arm around her, holding her

loosely against him. "Good luck, my darling."

His lips touched hers for just a moment and then he was gone.

*

GINA RECEIVED a transatlantic phone call from her parents in Germany. Since Peter's assertion that he had written to her after their breakup seven years ago, she had tried several times to get in touch with Joe and Esther, but they had been on an extended vacation. Now they wanted to share their experiences with their only child.

Joe spoke in his usual slow, concise style, but Esther bubbled with excitement. She had enthusiastically described the sights in France, Italy and Austria before Gina was able to get in a word. "Mama, slow down a minute, there's something I want to ask you."

"Sure, honey," Esther said, "what is it?"

"Did I ever receive a letter from Peter Van Housen at your address after I started at the University of Maryland?"

For a moment there was silence on the other end of the line. She held her breath and told herself it really didn't matter one way or the other.

"Why on earth do you want to bring that old scandal up, Ginny Lea?" Esther asked sharply. "Haven't you suffered enough over that—that rat!"

Gina's hands began to tremble. "Mama, please, it's important."

"Well, what if he did?" Her mother sounded petulant, like a child caught in a minor transgres-

sion. "He'd hurt you enough. He had no right to send you letters."

Gina gripped the telephone. "Wh-what did you do with them?" she demanded. If only her mother still had the letters.

Her momentary surge of hope was dashed as Esther answered defiantly. "I burned them, that's what I did with them. I took them down to the basement and threw them in the furnace. It was all for the best, Ginny Lea, you know it was—"

Gina hung up the phone.

LATER THAT morning Gina took a break and walked around the corner to the pastry shop. The empty feeling in her stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten breakfast.

Twyla was standing at the glass counter, eyeing the goodies. They settled down at a small round table on the sunny redwood deck at the front of the shop.

Gina felt tears pressing against her eyeballs and blinked to keep them back. Hesitantly she gave Twyla the highlights of her evening with Stewart, finishing by saying, "He's a very special kind of man and he was understanding and forgiving."

"And hurt," Twyla murmured.

Gina bowed her head. "Yes. I hate myself for what I've done to him. Will you go to Stewart? Be a friend to him? He's going to need someone. . . ."

"You have no right to ask that of me, Gina!" The anger in Twyla's tone was unmistakable. "I'm not in the market for your cast-off men!"

Gina looked at her friend thoughtfully. Twyla had never

snapped at her like that before. Gina frowned. Was she missing something here? Had Twyla and Stewart been more than just friends before Gina arrived on the scene?

"You're in love with him, aren't you?" Gina blurted.

"Gina—" Twyla snapped as she ground her cigarette out in the ash-tray. "Yes, I suppose I am," she admitted, "but what I decide to do about it is strictly my own business. I don't need your advice or your interference."

Twyla rose and walked rapidly down the redwood steps.

GINA SPENT the weekend trying to get in touch with Twyla, but she had apparently left town. Gina alternately condemned and defended herself. Couldn't she do anything right? She'd only wanted to love Peter and he'd wound up hating her. She'd tried to spare Stewart and instead she'd hurt him dreadfully. She'd been insensitive to Twyla's feelings and had managed to alienate her closest friend.

Why was she making such a mess of everything? Her thoughts twisted and turned and spun in circles.

That was the reason she turned off her alarm Sunday night and didn't waken until the doorbell chime lulled her to consciousness at ten o'clock on Monday morning. She jumped out of bed and felt dizzy, disoriented by the depth of her slumber.

She pulled her robe over her nightie. The doorbell chimed again and she walked through the apartment barefoot.

The bell chimed a third time and she called, "I'm coming, I'm coming," as she swung the door open. "For heaven's sake, must you make so much..."

The rest of the sentence died on her lips as her sleep-filled eyes finally focused on Peter Van Housen.

He grinned. "Are you always so grumpy in the mornings?"

"Only when I'm wakened out of a sound sleep," she snapped. "What do you want?" She wished he wouldn't stand there looking so darn sexy.

"For starters I'd like to come in..." he began, then his eyes narrowed. "Or aren't you alone?"

The full meaning of his question hit her. "My bed partners or lack of them are none of your business. Now if you'll excuse me—"

Gina turned to walk away, but he caught her by the arms and held her while his gaze roamed over her face. "Your bed partners most definitely are my business, but my remark was uncalled for and I apologize. You aren't awake enough yet to fake this kind of innocent indignation."

He pulled her closer and covered her slightly parted lips with his own. Gina closed her eyes and swayed toward him as the impact of his nearness, his touch, swamped her. He smelled fresh, like the sea breeze, and although his lips were warm, his face was cool and clean-shaven.

He turned his head slightly and murmured against the side of her mouth. "Will you let me share your bed this morning, Gina?"

She wanted to say yes, to press her body against his and feel the excite-

ment of his hard maleness against her. Why shouldn't she let him make love to her when they both wanted it so much?

Because, you little idiot, a cold voice within her warned, it wouldn't be making love, it would be having sex.

Do you want that?

Her body cried, *yes, anything*, but her mind won out. She pulled away from him and said, "Once you told me I wasn't good enough to be your lover. Well, now I don't want you, Peter, so keep your hands off me."

He watched her through half-closed eyes. "You're lying to yourself, sweetheart, but I'll give you time to face the truth."

Since it was obvious that Peter had no intention of leaving just yet Gina asked him to make the coffee while she went back into the bedroom and dressed. She looked a little more wide-awake after she bathed her face.

Peter had the coffee ready when she returned to the kitchen. He took a swallow of his coffee then glanced over at her. His fingers clamped around her wrist and he raised her hand. "You're not wearing your ring."

Gina was so startled she almost spilled her coffee. "I—I gave it back to Stewart."

He twined his fingers with hers. "Does this mean you're going to withdraw your petition for dissolution and come home with me where you belong?" His voice was tight, almost harsh.

Gina pulled her hand away from him. "No, it most certainly does not.

It just means that I'm too fond of Stewart to keep him waiting months, or even years, while you play games with the law." The memory of the scene two nights before brought back the pain. "I hurt him badly, but do you know what he did? He comforted me. That's the kind of man Stewart is."

The tears she'd been so determined not to shed fell. She put her face in her hands and sobbed, and then she was in Peter's arms, crying into his shoulder. "Why does it upset you so when you hurt Stewart? It doesn't bother you at all when you torment me."

Gina raised her head and looked at him, wide-eyed with amazement. "I couldn't possibly torment you. You have to care about someone in order to be hurt by them, and you never cared about me."

A spasm of emotion momentarily twisted his features as he pulled her roughly against him. "Don't taunt me about not caring. I don't care about anything now but protecting myself from your brand of loving."

Gina put her arms around Peter's neck and held him as she continued to sob. But her tears were no longer for Stewart; they were for the Ginny Lea and Peter of seven years ago who had been too young and immature to survive the holocaust that tore away their innocence and left them irreparably scarred.

For a long time they sat clasped in each other's arms. Finally the sobs stilled and the tears ceased. Peter reached in his pocket for a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. "We're not going to cry anymore over the

past, Gina," he said softly. "From now on we'll direct all our energy toward making a bright and happy future."

He bent his head and kissed her gently, parting her lips and caressing them with his tongue. All of Gina's resistance had dissolved with her tears and she savored the taste and the feel and the scent of him.

He tipped his head back. "You've matured into a woman of charm and passion. A woman I want for my own."

Like a valuable art object, she thought bitterly as she undraped her arms from around his neck. "I don't want to be your woman, Peter," she said, and almost added, *I want to be your love*, but bit the words off in time.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "We'll see," he promised and released her. "Now go wash your face. I have something I want to show you."

*

HE TURNED off onto a narrow road that led through a grove of pines and eucalyptus trees to a white sandy beach. A long driveway led to a rambling two-story redwood home.

Peter held her hand as they walked up the five wooden steps that led up to the covered porch. Gina stood speechless as he inserted a key in the lock on the heavy oak door. It swung open without protest.

She finally found her voice. "Whose house is this?"

He grinned and pulled her inside. Straight ahead of her was a green-

carpeted living room with a wall of glass that looked out over the ocean.

Gina walked over to the wall and gasped. Directly outside was a redwood deck that was accessible through a sliding glass door.

Peter came up behind her and put his arms around her waist. "Do you like it?" There was a note of urgency in his voice.

"Oh, I love it!" she exclaimed. "Who is the lucky person who owns this place?"

"We do," he said simply.

Gina felt as though an electric current had run through her. "I beg your pardon?"

"We own it, Gina. It's our home, and I want you to live here with me."

He ran his hand through his thick blond hair. "There's something else you should know. If our marriage is ever dissolved, the house will be all yours, no strings attached."

Gina was stunned. Why was Peter doing this? He'd been so sure that she'd only married him for his money, now he was forcing this valuable property on her.

"Why?" asked Gina.

Peter quirked one dark brown eyebrow. "Why? You know why. Because I knew I'd never entice you into leaving that gallery of yours and moving back to San Francisco. This way you're only a fifteen-minute drive from Mendocino and I can move my base of operations up here. I'll have to spend some time in San Francisco, but—"

"Peter, stop that! I told you—"

He leaned over and kissed her full on the mouth, effectively cutting off her indignant tirade.

HE WAS sprawled out on one of the wide redwood loungers. He looked relaxed and content, and she almost expected to hear him purr. Instead he held out his hand to her. "Come here," he invited.

She eyed him warily. "What do you want?"

He patted the space beside him. "Come on, I'm not going to bite you, tempting though the thought is."

He looked so appealing, almost boyish, pleading with those incredibly blue eyes. She moved slowly in the direction of the lounge and sat down as he reclined beside her. She felt herself being guided downward and she twisted around so that she could stretch out beside him.

He cradled her lovingly but made no attempt to kindle the desire that burst into flame so easily between them. Nothing made sense anymore. Here she was curled up in an intimate embrace with a man she was supposed to hate and her only regret was that she couldn't lie like this with him forever.

His hold on her relaxed slightly and his heart beat in a strong steady rhythm beneath her ear. He was asleep. She turned her head carefully and kissed the hollow at the base of his throat then wiggled into a more comfortable position against him. He grunted contentedly. She closed her eyes and let the lullaby of the ocean rock her to sleep.

Sometime later, as she struggled upward through the warm drowsiness, she felt the hand stroking her bare breast and the lips that were nuzzling the sensitive side of her

neck. Gina opened her eyes and gazed into Peter's deep blue ones, smoky now with passion.

She realized that he'd unbuttoned her blouse and unfastened the front clasp on her satin bra.

He dipped his head, taking the dark, throbbing tip in his mouth. The tingle in her stomach spread down her legs and unconsciously her fingers began to knead his thigh. He moaned with pleasure.

"Gina. Oh, Gina," he murmured huskily. "When I woke up and found you in my arms I—I couldn't help it."

He rolled over until his body nearly covered hers. They were aware of nothing but the burning urgency of their terrible need to be one in body as well as soul.

It wasn't surprising that they didn't hear the commotion inside the house or the heavy glass door being slid open—until two childish voices yelled, "Uncle Peter, Uncle Peter, surprise!"

Gina looked over her shoulder to see two children being held back by Peter's sister, Lillian. Behind them were an older but still recognizable Hans and Bertha Van Housen: Peter's parents, who stood rigid, their faces a study of shock and embarrassment.

Gina's entire body burned with humiliation as she held her gaping blouse together with shaking hands. Peter swore and held her close.

Gina recognized Lilly's voice although it had lost its usual confident timbre. "Pete, I'm sorry. Mom and Dad wanted to see the house."

Gina heard the children protest as Lilly ordered them into the house *immediately*, along with the sound of scuffling feet before the glass door slid closed. She was shivering uncontrollably, not from cold but from shattered nerves. Peter's arms tightened about her.

"I want to die!" Her voice was jerky.

"Don't talk like that," he said harshly. "Come now, pull yourself together and we'll go in."

"No!" It was more a scream than a statement. "I couldn't face them! Oh, please, take me home."

He gripped her by the shoulders and shook her gently. "You are home, and we're going to go in there and establish that fact once and for all."

She sat shaking her head from side to side. "No, Peter, they never did like me, and now they have even more reason not to."

He started tucking her blouse under her opened slacks. "If you don't like the way my parents treat you, then do something about it," he advised her.

Gina stared at him uncomprehendingly. "But—but they're your family."

He shook his head. "You're my family, and this is your house. Now, we're going in there and confronting them, and if they give you any trouble, light into them the way you do to me. I guarantee they'll back down."

"Why should they do that? You never do," she questioned.

He kissed her on the tip of her nose. "Oh, but I do, love. You slash

me to ribbons every time we get together, but I keep coming back for more." He frowned. "I can't think what's wrong with me."

For a moment she was tempted to do as Peter asked. Hans and Bertha Van Housen had considered her so totally unacceptable for their youngest son that it was tempting to throw a few of their own rocks back at them, but it was too late now. There would just be a painful scene.

She rolled away from him and stood on her still-rubbery legs. "There's nothing to be gained. I'll never live here with you. You can delay my petition for dissolution from being heard for a while but when we finally go to court I'll win and you know it. Now I'm going home. If you won't take me I'll walk into Albion and hire someone to drive me to Mendocino."

Peter held her by both arms. "Oh, no, Gina, you're not going to run away again!"

"Again!" she raged. "It wasn't me who ran away after we were married! You walked out and left me to face my family and friends, not to mention the newspaper reporters and curious bystanders. I didn't run away, I was forced to move out of San Francisco in order to preserve my sanity. Now step aside and let me go."

His fingers tightened on her upper arms and for a few seconds he glared at her with a rage almost equal to her own. Then, unexpectedly he dropped his hands from her arms and nodded with a weary resignation. "All right, I'll take you

home," he said quietly and led her down the steps to his ebony Jaguar.

They drove the fifteen scenic miles in silence and when they stopped in front of her building he didn't get out of the car but reached across her and opened her door. As she turned to step out she said, "Goodbye, Peter," and as she shut the door, he murmured, "Goodbye," and then he was gone.

It was late the next morning when she looked up from the cash register where she was making change for a customer and saw Lillian Van Housen Wilcox standing in front of her. The warm flush of embarrassment flooded through Gina as she remembered the intimate scene Lilly and her parents had witnessed the day before in Peter's home. They stood looking at each other across the counter.

Lilly was the first to rally. "It's important that I talk to you, Ginny Lea."

They went upstairs to the apartment and Gina made coffee.

Gina fingered her cup. "It must have been an embarrassment when you—uh—walked in on us yesterday."

Lilly sighed. "We were all too flustered to look closely. None of us knew you had come back into Peter's life until he came home after bringing you here." She shuddered. "I've never seen my brother so mad!" She rolled her eyes. "Peter even used words I'd never heard before. When he finally calmed down a little he told us the whole story."

"Did he tell you he's contesting my petition for dissolution and wants me to live with him?" Gina asked.

"Oh, yes," Lilly answered. "When he dropped that little bombshell Mom went into a decline and Dad had to put her to bed." She thought a moment, then added, "She managed to recover just before dinner was served. Mom knows exactly when to pout, sigh, cry, faint or yell in order to get her own way. It works with everyone in the family but Peter."

Gina faced Lilly squarely. "Okay, Lil," she said, "I know your parents neither like nor approve of me, but what about you? Are you my friend or my enemy?"

This time there was no levity in Lilly's tone. "That depends on you, Gina. You really did a job on Peter seven years ago." She shifted in her chair and when she spoke again it was a challenge. "Just what do you want from my brother?"

Gina was careful not to let the cup shake in her hands. "My freedom," she answered.

Lilly spread her hands in a vague gesture. "Did you ever love him, Gina?"

Gina's shoulders slumped. She set down her coffee cup and said, "I've always loved Peter. It was his love for me that wasn't strong enough." She grimaced. "Tell your mother to find a suitable replacement for me and he'll be happy to let me go. All he wants is a wife to give him children and be presentable to his business associates."

Lilly looked at Gina with disgust. "Are you blind? Peter's hurting bad. When he confronted us yesterday afternoon he looked the same way he did when he came back to San Francisco seven years ago and found you gone. I worried about him then and I worry about him now. The first thing he did when he came into the house yesterday was pour himself a glass of whiskey and he's been drinking steadily ever since."

Gina blanched. "I find that hard to believe."

"Believe it," Lilly muttered. "He drank all through dinner and the evening last night, and when he got up this morning he started drinking again. That's why I'm here. He insists he's going to drive back to San Francisco this afternoon and someone has to stop him. You're the only one who can do it."

A germ of fear planted itself in Gina's mind. She felt panicky as she stood up. "I can't believe that I'll have any influence with Peter," she said, "but if he insists on leaving I'll go with him and drive."

*

GINA FOLLOWED Lilly into Peter's living room, where Bertha was reclining on the cream-colored velvet sofa with one arm over her eyes.

"Lilly," she scolded, "where have you been? Peter's been grumbling for the past hour because you were gone so long with the car."

She looked past Lilly and for the first time saw Gina. Her jaw tightened and she sat up. She glared at Gina and spoke in a glacial tone. "We'd hoped you'd have the good

grace to stay out of Peter's life, but apparently that was too much to expect."

Seven years ago Gina would have been crushed by such a stinging rejection, but now she locked her gaze with Bertha's and said, "I happen to be Peter's wife and this is my home. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must talk to my husband."

She walked off, leaving mother and daughter staring after her in shocked silence.

Gina found Peter standing at the picture window looking out at the ocean. He turned and saw her. The ice in his highball glass jingled, an indication that his hand was not altogether steady. For a moment he just looked at her, and when he spoke it was not a welcome. "Well, to what do I owe the honor of your presence?" he mocked. He took a swallow of his drink without breaking eye contact with her.

Well, she'd overcome the first hurdle, Bertha, so she might as well tackle Peter too. She walked across the heavily carpeted floor to stand in front of him.

She answered factually. "Lilly brought me. She said you were drinking too much and talking about driving to San Francisco and she wanted me to stop you."

He muttered an oath and sat down on the couch. "I see my big sister is still meddling in my life."

"It's only because she loves you that she worries."

He rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. "I'm glad to hear somebody loves me."

He sounded so bleak, as though he really was lonely and unloved. Gina bit her lip but the words came anyway. "Do you want me to love you, Peter?"

For a second she thought she saw a flicker of yearning, but it was replaced by a veiled scrutiny. "You know what I want," he said impatiently. "I want *you*."

Gina tried to ignore the hurt. She should have known better than to ask that question. He didn't want her love, only her body.

She shifted uncomfortably and changed the subject. "Have you had lunch? Come to the kitchen with me and I'll fix you a sandwich."

She put out her hand to help him up, but when he took it he gave a tug and she landed in his lap instead. His bristly unshaven face was rough against hers and he smelled of whiskey but she didn't care about that as she murmured, "After you've eaten you should lie down and sleep, then you'll feel better."

His hands brushed lightly against the side of her breasts and she could feel her response deep inside. "If I do will you lie down with me?" he asked.

She wanted to say yes so badly that she had to clamp her jaws together. She tipped her head and looked up at him. "Is that all you ever think of?" she complained.

He grinned. He laid his cheek against hers. It was then that Gina realized something was wrong. His skin was cool and damp with a fine film of perspiration. "Peter," she murmured, "are you all right?"

He shook his head almost imperceptibly. "No," he breathed. "My stomach, it's churning. I'm afraid—"

He stood up suddenly. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry—"

He stumbled from the room and hurried down the hall toward the bathroom.

WHEN Peter joined her half an hour later he had shaved, showered and changed. He radiated enough sex appeal to start a stampede, but it was his vulnerability that tugged at Gina.

The corners of his mouth twitched upward in a tentative smile as he said, "Sorry. I didn't mean to make such a fool of myself back there."

Her heart was doing odd little pit-a-pats that made her voice stumble. "Do—do you feel better now?"

"Yes," he said, watching her. "I always feel better when you're around." He moved his hand to cover hers. "Gina," he said thickly. "Come here. Sit on my lap again."

"Oh, Peter," she groaned as he clasped her around the waist. "What am I going to do with you?"

His voice was unsteady as he said, "Touch me, hold me. I need your loving tenderness, sweetheart. I became addicted to it seven years ago and these long years without it have been agony."

He cradled her close as his lips caressed hers with a hunger that he could not contain.

Gina stroked his cheek as she whispered, "Oh, Peter, I did love you so."

His gaze held hers. "Did?" he asked.

She closed her eyes to shut out the pleading so visible in his. "I committed myself to you once," she said tightly, "and you decided you didn't want me. I'm not prepared to do that again."

She sighed. It was all such a tangled web and they couldn't go on this way. Either she must live with Peter, who desired her but did not love her, in a marriage that would probably not endure once the passion had been satisfied, or she must finally make him understand that she wanted the marriage terminated immediately.

She glanced anxiously over at him. He was slumped in his chair and looked pale and exhausted.

"You still look pretty rocky. I really think you should go upstairs and take a nap."

He looked up at her. "I don't suppose it will do any good to ask you to take a nap with me?"

She shook her head. "No."

He let out his breath and pushed himself off the chair. He stood but reached out to hold on to Gina as the dizziness returned. "Sorry," he muttered, "but I'm afraid you're going to have to help me upstairs."

She put her arm around his waist and gave him the support he needed to negotiate the long hall and the wide rustic stairway.

The feel of his tall, sturdy body pressing hip to hip and thigh to thigh with hers was rapidly melting her bones, and she knew if they stood together like that much longer, she'd go to bed with him whether he asked her again or not.

He hugged her closer to him and turned to the left. "It's the first door down the hall."

The beautifully decorated room was huge, with a fireplace at one end. The sheer eggshell curtains that covered the glass wall did little to obstruct the sweeping view of the ocean. Several tables and chests, including a very feminine dressing table with a lighted mirror, were grouped around the bed, and a velvet sofa and two chairs faced the fireplace.

"Oh, Peter," she breathed, "I've never seen anything so elegant."

He lowered his head and kissed her cheek. "I had it decorated for you."

"For me?" She felt her resistance weakening. She mentally shook herself and pulled abruptly away from him. "Peter," she said hotly. "Did you honestly believe that you could buy me with all this?"

He looked surprised by her sudden outburst and his voice was cool when he responded. "I shouldn't have to. You're my wife."

Gina gasped and he grabbed her by the shoulders. "You're driving me out of my mind. You touch me, caress me, respond to my lovemaking until I'm half crazy with need, then pull away and insist that I stop. My God, Gina, don't you know what that does to a man?"

Gina struggled ineffectually as his mouth ground into hers, lustful and hurting. She wrenched herself out of his grasp. "You're never to blame for anything, are you? You won't leave me alone. I've told you in every way I know how that I don't want your

kisses and embraces, but you continue to force them on me and then accuse *me* of being a tease."

She turned and rushed from the room, but she'd forgotten about the sharp turn at the top of the stairway and was going too fast to maneuver it successfully. Her foot slipped and she plunged down the long flight of wide, carpeted stairs!

Pain racked every inch of her, but she was finally still. She was vaguely aware of footsteps and voices coming from all directions, and when she forced her eyes to open she saw Peter kneeling beside her, his face white and stricken. She could see his lips moving.

She was sore all over but the pain seemed concentrated in her right foot and her head. She uttered a sharp cry that ended in a moan.

"Gina, darling." Peter looked almost as bad as she felt. His eyes were haunted. She caught her breath at the torment she saw on his face. "Oh, darling, I'm so sorry."

He buried his face in her shoulder and her arms slid around him.

PETER DROVE her to the hospital. After a series of X-rays, Gina was told that there was nothing broken and that her ankle, although sore, would heal quickly if she stayed off it as much as possible.

On the way back Gina insisted that she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself at her apartment but Peter outvoted her. They stopped in Mendocino only long enough to pack some clothes for her and arrange for someone to run the gallery

for a few days, then returned to Peter's home.

At least she wouldn't have to contend with the rest of Peter's family. Hans, Bertha, Lilly and the two children had left for San Francisco.

Gina was nearly asleep when they arrived at the house, and Peter carried her upstairs and put her to bed. He showed her how to use the intercom system should she need help during the night, then bent to brush his lips across hers in a hurried good-night kiss and left.

It was only then that Gina realized how much she wanted to share the oversized bed with him.

The next morning Peter carried her downstairs to the library, where she chose a current novel and stretched out on the couch to read while he worked in his office. He was the perfect nurse—cool, efficient and cheerful, but uninvolved on a personal level. Gina blinked back tears as she remembered the sweetness of their early caresses and later the fire of their shared passion.

That evening they had dinner in the dining room. Afterward Peter carried her back up to his bedroom and again left her with a light good-night kiss and walked down the hall to another bed.

The following day was more of the same, and by evening Gina was a bundle of screaming nerve ends. Peter's cheerful brotherly attitude was driving her right up the wall. She had to get out of there! She had a lot of bruises but her head no longer hurt and she was able to walk with a limp.

They had dinner in the family room in front of a fire. When they

had finished eating, Gina's hand shook with nervousness as she poured the coffee. She'd made up her mind to confront Peter about leaving.

She handed him a cup as she said, "I—I'm getting around quite well now, Peter, and I'm anxious to get back to the shop."

He looked at her and smiled. "It's still too early, give it a few more days. If you're worried about your business I can have one of our people at the gallery in San Francisco come up for a week or so."

She shook her head. "No, you don't understand. I want to go home."

The smile was gone, the shuttered look back on his face. "You are home, Gina," he said as he set his cup beside hers.

She clutched her hands together in her lap to still their trembling. "No, Peter," she said, "I'm not."

He looked at her without expression. "You don't have any intention of trying to make this marriage work, do you." It wasn't a question but a statement.

She looked away, unable to hold his unwavering gaze. "Our marriage died seven years ago. Let it rest in peace."

"I'd be happy to," he said grimly, "but unfortunately I've found no peace in these intervening years and I don't think you have either. What do you want from me, Gina? It seems to me that if I'm willing to forgive and try to forget you certainly should be."

There it was again, his absolute certainty that she was the sinner and he had been sinned against.

She closed her eyes against the pain and forced her voice to remain steady as she said, "Why do you refuse to understand, Peter? When I was eighteen I gave you all that I had to give—my love. When you walked out on me without trying to understand my side of the story I wanted to die."

Peter caught his breath but she continued. "I waited for you to come back, but you sent your lawyer instead with threats of retribution if I tried to get any money from you." She grimaced. "That's all the breakup of our brief marriage meant to you—the amount of money it would cost to get rid of me."

"No, Gina—" Peter gasped, but she wasn't listening.

"The reporters hounded me constantly. I couldn't even go out of the house without being accosted by photographers and newspeople." She looked squarely at Peter then and let the hostility blaze from her eyes. "We survived by moving three thousand miles across the country and you have the gall to accuse *me* of running away! *You* ran out when I needed you, Peter, and I managed to put my life back together and live without you. Now all I want from you is the same thing I've asked you for over and over, my freedom. I don't want your house, or your money, or your influence, I just want to have this farce of a marriage dissolved so I can get on with my life."

She raised her head to look at him and was surprised to find a grimace

of such utter desolation on his face that she unwittingly uttered a little cry and held out her hand, but before she could touch him the cold, hard look had returned and she decided she'd only imagined the other.

"All right, Gina," he said with icy deliberation. "I'll give you your freedom . . . on one condition. That you spend one night making love with me."

This time he had gone too far. She stood and was appalled to find that her knees were shaking. "Well, thanks but no thanks," she said with what she hoped was the proper amount of sarcasm. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go pack."

She started to limp toward the door but he swung around and caught her, pulling her roughly into his arms. "Now, Gina!" he muttered as his lips pressed kisses from her temple to her ear. He nuzzled the sensitive hollow at the side of her throat and set her pulse to pounding.

She tried to pull away but his arms tightened and his hand found its way under her blouse and cupped one of her lace-covered breasts. Somehow, without her realizing it, he had managed to unfasten the button on her white slacks and his hand dipped under the waistband and stroked the bare small of her back. "You respond to me, you always have."

He was right! Her traitorous body was on fire with desire for him, and when he swung her into his arms and headed for the stairway she clasped her arms around his neck.

In the beautiful blue master bedroom he stood her beside the huge

bed and started to remove her blouse. He kissed her tenderly and started removing her slacks. She let him undress her. He lowered her to the bed, then undressed himself and slid in beside her. She shivered with need as he drew her naked body against his own and sought her moist, trembling lips.

"Please, Gina, let me love you."

She slid her arms around him then and opened her mouth to his plundering tongue as they both ignited in flame. He seemed to know exactly where to touch and caress her to bring her to the edge of madness and she wasn't prepared for the sharp searing pain that accompanied his total possession. She stiffened and for a moment neither of them moved as they lay suspended on the brink of ecstasy.

Gina opened her eyes and saw Peter's face above her, frozen with surprise. For a second she was afraid he was going to withdraw and her arms tightened around him as his voice, raw with anguish, sounded against her ear. "Oh, my lovely Gina!"

It was a cry of pain, not of the flesh but of the spirit. Then with infinite tenderness he began once more the rhythm of passion, bringing her slowly, carefully, to the radiant joy of shared release that bonded them together and made them one.

Afterward he held her, gentled her, until her breathing stabilized and she returned slowly to the real world. Then he rolled away from her and sat on the side of the bed with his back to her, his shoulders slumped. It was then that she knew

she had been wrong. Their union hadn't bonded them together, but had wrenched them even further apart. Peter knew now beyond any doubt that she had never made love with Mel Calicutt or any other man, but the knowledge had come too late. It no longer made any difference to him. The wonder had all been on her part: for him the experience had been a disappointment.

Tears welled in her eyes as she put out her hand and touched his bare hip. "Peter?" she whispered.

He didn't turn to look at her and his voice was flat as he said, "I didn't mean to hurt you, Gina. I—I didn't know... I should have stopped but I couldn't... I just couldn't."

He rubbed his hands over his face, then stood and began dressing quickly. Gina wanted to tell him that the pain in her body had been minor, but the pain in her soul was so great that all she could do was sob and bury her face in her pillow.

She felt his hand stroking her hair. "I'm sorry. I can't possibly tell you how sorry," he said in that wooden tone and walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. A few minutes later she heard the powerful engine of the Jaguar roar to life and tear off into the night.

Gina shuddered convulsively. She'd suspected that he would walk out once he'd had his fill of her, but she hadn't expected it to come so soon. What had gone wrong?

*

SHE'D HAD a long cry and was just finishing dressing when the doorbell rang. She went down and tentatively looked through the peephole.

"Twyla!" Gina cried, and rushed to unlock the door. "Twyla," she said again as her friend stepped through the open doorway and hugged her.

Twyla released Gina as she said, "Peter called and asked me to come. He said you needed me. What has that pig done to you now?"

Gina laughed because it was either that or cry.

"Did you two quarrel?"

"Not at all." Gina's voice was bitter. "Tonight he took me to bed. When it was over he got up, dressed, apologized and left."

Twyla's brown eyes widened. "Just like that?"

"Just like that." Her voice broke but she forced herself to go on. "I—I've come to the conclusion that this was all part of his revenge for my supposed deception. I believe he planned to seduce me and then deliberately let me know how little I meant to him by doing just what he did." She put her hands over her eyes. "Well, I hope he's happy now because his little scheme worked."

"Are you sure, Gina?" Twyla asked. "He sounded frantic when he called me. I dropped everything and came running."

Gina looked at her friend. "And I thought you were mad at me," she murmured.

"I was," Twyla shrugged, "but I called Stewart the other day and in-

vited him over for dinner. We talked and, well, it's going to take him a while to get over you, but if I keep plying him with home cooking it might speed up the healing process and, who knows, we may get together yet." Twyla patted her arm. "But I didn't come here to talk about my love life. It's yours I'm concerned about."

Gina blinked away the tears and swallowed. "Take me home, Twyla."

Twyla nodded and stood. "Come on, I'll help you get your things together."

"GINA, you have a visitor."

Gina turned. Not four steps behind her in her shop stood Peter Van Housen. His eyes had a bruised look about them. He didn't resemble a man who had recently tasted the sweetness of revenge.

He took her by the arm and led her out of the shop and upstairs to her apartment.

Peter stood by the picture window looking out at the churning waters of the bay as he said, "I've withdrawn my objections to the dissolution of our marriage. You won't have any further trouble about it."

Gina put her hand across her midsection as she lowered herself to sit on the couch, and it took her a minute to catch her breath and realize that he hadn't punched her in the stomach. Peter's revenge was even more complete than he realized. He'd left her with a future so lonely and bleak that she didn't dare contemplate it.

"The house is yours as I told you it would be." He shifted restlessly and clutched the curtain in his fist. "I've also made arrangements for you to receive alimony."

Gina sat hunched over, numb with misery. She didn't even try to protest. Peter would never believe that she didn't want his money. All she could do was return the checks each month unopened until he finally understood that she would never accept them.

As for the house... she couldn't think about that now. She was on the verge of breaking into little pieces.

Peter turned slowly and their eyes met. He looked awful. Maybe it was his conscience. Was he finding vengeance bitter and unfulfilling?

"Don't you have anything to say to me?" he asked softly. He sounded so forlorn, as though he really wanted her to talk to him.

She shook her head, only wanting to get this over with.

He started to walk toward her but then stopped and turned toward the door instead.

"Peter." Gina was as surprised as he to hear herself call his name. "What did I do wrong?" It came out as little more than a whisper. "When—when we made love, were you so disappointed?"

Peter stared at her, seemingly unable to comprehend what she was saying. He walked slowly to the couch and sat down beside her. Gently he took her face in his hands and tipped it so he could devour her with his eyes. "Oh, dear Lord," he breathed, "is that what you

thought? That I was disappointed?"

Peter's face seemed to crumble, and with a low groan he pulled her into his arms in a crushing embrace.

"I love you, Gina. I love you so much that I honestly don't think I can survive if I lose you again."

Gina caught her breath and held it as she looked up at him and gasped. "But you said..."

He looked down at her. "I know. I said that you had killed the love I once felt for you, but I was lying. The past seven years without you have been hell. If I'd known where you were I would have come for you but, God forgive me, I believed my parents and Veronica when they said you had left San Francisco with Calicutt so I didn't search for you. I did write to you in care of your parents, though. Please believe that."

"I know," she said. "I talked to Mama."

Gina slipped her hands under his loose shirt and lightly massaged the sparse flesh of his bare back.

He stretched and almost purred as he said, "Oh, that feels so good. I can't get enough of your touch."

"Can't you?" she asked as she continued the movement. "Then what did I do wrong the other night? Why did you leave me so abruptly?"

He moaned and held her closer as though using her as a shield against the pain her question seemed to cause him. "You didn't do anything wrong, sweetheart." He pushed her head back against his chest and stroked her short hair. "How could you possibly have thought I was disappointed in our lovemaking?" he

murmured thickly. "It was all I had ever hoped it would be and more, except..."

The joy she had felt at his words was tempered. "Except what?" she whispered anxiously.

"When I realized how—innocent—you were I—" He lifted their twined hands and kissed the back of hers. "In that blinding moment of truth I knew that I had wronged you unforgivably and wasted seven long years of our lives in a torment of my own making instead of spending them happily together, loving each other and raising a family."

Gina knew it would take him a long time to exorcise his guilt, but she also knew she must not let it weigh too heavily on his conscience. She removed her hand from his and put it on his thigh, then began caressing him with her fingers. "It's not too late to start that family," she said softly.

The muscles beneath her hand twitched and his voice was husky as he said, "If you keep that up the first one is going to be conceived right here."

She lifted her arms to Peter in mute invitation, and the naked hunger in his eyes was the acceptance she'd longed for.

He moaned deep in his throat and took her in his arms. "I love you, Gina," he murmured, and there was something akin to reverence in his tone. "I've loved you from the first day we met, and I'll love you until the day I die."

Her happiness was so great that she was sure it was shining from her eyes as she lifted her face to his.

"I've never belonged to any man but you, Peter," she told him softly.

His head lowered and his eager mouth found hers and sent liquid fire racing through her veins. She pressed herself against him and gloried in his

masculinity. She knew that she would never again have to deny the passion that blazed between them. A passion so wild that she doubted it could ever be tamed. She sincerely hoped that it couldn't.



**Solution to
CROSSWORD #29
Vol.5 No.5**

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**RUTH
LANGAN**
**The Proper
Miss Porter**



It has been a struggle for single mom Alexandra Porter to support her eight-year-old daughter, Charley. But hard work brings her a well-deserved promotion—as well as the unexpected, and seemingly unwanted, attention of her handsome boss, Clif Andrews.

“Here are the two personnel files you requested.” Martha James paused by her boss’s desk. “I take it one of these will be the new manager of Division Two?”

Gray eyes slowly appraised her. If she hadn’t been secretary to his father for twenty years before Clif Andrews assumed the presidency of Andrews Motors, she would have wilted beneath that icy stare. But she had known him when he was an awkward teen. That, and the fact that he had urged her to stay on after his father’s death, gave her a certain self-assurance.

“Has everyone been notified of the meeting this afternoon?” he asked.

“All but your aunt. She won’t be back from LaCosta until tomorrow.”

“Marion’s vote is only necessary to break a tie. I’m sure the board will accept my decision as final.” While Clif spoke, he picked up the first manila folder.

“Bill Campbell’s a good man,” Martha said. “Top of his class at Ohio State. Worked his tail off at the Tech Center.”

Spreading out the contents of the second folder, Clif studied the photo.

“Alexandra Porter’s his equal,” Martha went on. “Worked her way through Michigan State. Did every job the company handed her.”

“That so? Martha, you wouldn’t be trying to influence my decision, would you?”

She gave a self-conscious grin.

Glancing at his watch, he said, “Hold all my phone calls for the next hour. I want to study these files one more time.”

The hour had stretched into two, as he closed both files. The candidates were equally qualified, but one had something extra. Alexandra Porter had earned the respect of the other employees, not only her peers, but the people on the line. That made her invaluable.

“ALEXANDRA.” Mike Miller’s booming voice could shake buildings. “Call on line one. Top brass.”

“Miss Porter, I’m Mr. Andrews’s secretary. This is to notify you that your name is being offered to the board for the position of manager of Division Two. They will have to ratify the nomination at one, so Mr. Andrews asks you to be at the boardroom at one-thirty. He believes in personally introducing new managers.”

Alexandra couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“Congratulations, Miss Porter. You’ve certainly earned this promotion.”

As she replaced the receiver, she looked up to see Mike lounging in the doorway. His curly blond hair,

blue eyes and weight-lifter's physique made him the darling of the secretarial pool. He'd been her assistant for two years.

"Anything I should know?"

Breathlessly she said, "I'm to be the new manager of Division Two."

His eyes lit with real pleasure. "All right!" He let out a whoop and swung her around, then, sensing her embarrassment, he set her down and offered his hand. "Congratulations, Ms. Manager."

"Thank you. Oh, Mike." She covered her face with her hands, then squared her shoulders. "I'm going to celebrate."

"Atta girl. Break out the champagne."

Her cool look dampened his enthusiasm. "Did you say you had two extra tickets to the Wolverine game Sunday?"

At his nod, she said, "I'll buy them from you."

"I didn't know you liked football."

"I usually can't spare the time." She shrugged. "But... someone I know loves the game."

Someone she knew? The tone of her voice told him it was someone special. Mike knew better than to pry. Alexandra Porter was the most private woman he'd ever met.

He gave her a flashing smile. "Better yet, I'll give them to you. My gift to the new manager of Division Two."

"Oh, Mike, that's sweet. Thank you." She seemed flustered as she turned away, striving for the composure she'd always been able to

display in times of excitement or stress.

ALEXANDRA halted for a moment in the doorway. This was her first glimpse of the boardroom. The walls were paneled in mahogany. A portrait of the firm's founder, Cyrus Quin Andrews, was hung in a place of honor. Slightly below it was that of his son, Cyril Quin Andrews, the current president's father. A conference table dominated the room, with nine chairs on either side and one at each end.

There was only one vacant chair—at the opposite end of the table from the president. Everyone in the room was staring at her. Even the president.

Clif's gaze was arrested by the mass of auburn curls twisted into a knot on top of her proudly tilted head. The black-and-white photograph hadn't prepared him for this lush redhead. Her skin was pale, her complexion flawless. Not a single freckle marred her flushed cheeks, her tiny upturned nose.

"Congratulations, Ms. Porter. May I present our board of directors."

As Clif spoke each name, he continued studying her.

Her charcoal suit was perfectly tailored to fit her slender frame. Yet soft womanly curves were evident. A prim white blouse was brightened by a silk foulard tie in shades of blue and green, enhancing her vivid coloring.

Realizing he was staring, he said, "The only absent member of the board is my aunt, Marion Andrews.

I'm certain she would add her voice to mine in welcoming you."

"Thank you, Mr. Andrews."

He hadn't been expecting that voice. Low and smoky like a blues singer's, it touched something deep inside him.

With an effort, he tore his gaze away. "And now, I'll accept a motion for adjournment. That way, the members can offer you their individual good wishes."

Feeling overwhelmed by the handshakes and congratulations that followed, Alexandra murmured her responses.

Clif paused at the door. He'd intended to leave quickly, but when she stepped beside him, he held out his hand, forcing her to stop.

"Congratulations again, Miss Porter."

Her head barely reached his shoulder. Her eyes were the most intense shade of green he'd ever seen. He'd had no idea she was so small. Her hand was cool; her handshake firm.

Alexandra had seen Clif Andrews hundreds of times during her years with the company. When she'd worked in the engineering department, he had dropped by almost daily to study the new prototypes. He'd never noticed her; the auto was his passion.

As always, his dark suit was impeccable, carefully tailored to mold his wide shoulders and narrow waist and hips. His thick black hair was razor short. She could read nothing in his slate-gray eyes. Behind his back the employees called him "the Ice Man." It suited him.

Very firmly she withdrew her hand. "Thank you, Mr. Andrews." She moved through the doorway and was gone. Behind her lingered the heady fragrance of autumn woods.

Clif hesitated for a moment longer. Why did Ms. Porter's fragrance seem so at odds with her prim, businesslike appearance? And why should that bother him so?

ALEXANDRA turned her car into the driveway of a turreted stone gatehouse. It had once been the caretaker's cottage of a waterfront estate, now a posh subdivision. Though the new houses around the gatehouse were more luxurious, they lacked its classic design.

Switching off the engine, she hurried up the walk, but the door was pulled open before she reached it.

"You're late. You've got to talk to her. She must have inherited that obstinate streak from you."

Alexandra stared at the woman whose enormous bulk filled the doorway. Milly Bingham lived three doors away. When her husband had died, she'd considered going back to the work force. But seeing Alexandra's need for a housekeeper, she'd simply taken over and made herself indispensable.

The purple floral dress she wore drifted nearly to her ankles. On her feet were faded purple scuffs. But it was her hair that fascinated Alexandra. Bright red-orange, it stuck out in little tufts. Yesterday it had been shoulder length and jet-black.

Seeing the direction of her gaze, Milly smiled. "Like it? I found an old photo of Fonteyn in a red wig. I

know I can improve my exercises with this color."

"I see." Strangely enough, she did. Alexandra understood that the woman inside Milly was a ballerina. Despite her size and age, she was, in her mind, the dancer she'd once been.

"Now what's Charley being obstinate about?" Alexandra asked.

"Charley was complaining about static electricity when she brushed her hair. I assured her olive oil would help."

"A humidifier would be simpler. Where is she?"

"Upstairs, keeping out of my way. Congratulations. I couldn't believe it when you called. You never even hinted that you were in line for a promotion."

Alexandra's green eyes danced with excitement. "Oh, Milly, I was afraid it would be bad luck to talk about it."

"I made something special to celebrate. Roast beef and all the trimmings."

Alexandra inhaled. "Smells wonderful. You'll stay for dinner?" She didn't really need to ask. Milly loved to eat almost as much as she loved to cook.

As Alexandra reached the stairs, Milly called, "Tell Charley 'impotent.' She needed an eight-letter word meaning 'lacking in power or vigor.' I just thought of it."

Alexandra grinned. "Thanks, I'll tell her."

"She spends too much time with those puzzles."

"Comes from all those books she read while I studied."

Hurrying up the stairs, Alexandra stood in the doorway staring at the figure sprawled across the bed. A mass of fiery tangles obscured the girl's face. A pair of faded boy's chinos and a khaki shirt—her favorite uniform—hung loosely on her thin frame. She was small for her eight years, and into her tomboy phase.

"Hi, Charley. Milly says 'impotent.'"

"I already figured out the word." And she leapt from the bed, hurling herself into Alexandra's arms.

"You did it. Mom, you did it."

"GOT THE tickets?" It was Sunday afternoon and almost time for the football game to start.

"Right here." Alexandra patted her purse.

"Know where we're sitting?" Charley asked.

"I guess we'll just follow these arrows to our section."

All around them vendors hawked shirts and hats, souvenirs, programs. Like a teeming ant colony, swarms of people continued to pour through the doors of the stadium.

Charley said, "Come on. I see our section up here," and racing ahead, she read the numbers then flew back to her mother's side.

"I thought double A would be back here somewhere. But these are all single letters. It means we're in the front row. Come on." Tugging on Alexandra's sleeve, Charley hustled her toward their seats.

"Oh. Let's get a hot dog," Charley called.

Waving her hand, Alexandra caught the vendor's attention.

After the first bite, she rolled her eyes heavenward. "I'd forgotten how good a hot dog could taste at a game."

With a deafening roar from the crowd, the two teams charged onto the field. By kickoff time she and Charley had managed to polish off the hot dogs along with two large grape sodas.

CLIF INSTRUCTED the attendants where to set up the cocktails and hors d'oeuvres in his private box at the stadium. Years ago, his father had begun the custom of taking a box to entertain executives of the company as well as important clients and friends, and Clif was reluctant to discontinue the tradition. Besides, as owner of the Wolverine team, he was expected to entertain at all home games.

As the guests began arriving, he noted his aunt singling out the daughter of one of their biggest shareholders. Groaning inwardly, he steered himself.

"Clif, you remember Marguerite Van Horn?"

Swathed in silver fox the exact shade of her platinum hair, the woman gave him an approving look.

He extended his hand. "Miss Van Horn."

"Marguerite." She dropped her hand to his sleeve. "It was so good of you to invite my father and me," she purred. "We'd like to reciprocate by taking you to dinner at the club later."

Cool metallic-looking eyes met hers. "Sorry. I'm afraid I've already made other plans."

"Couldn't we persuade you to change them?"

"Not possible. But thank you." He turned away to greet a cluster of guests. "Tony." Clif clasped a tall, bearded man in a bear hug. The two had been childhood friends. When they'd elected to attend rival colleges, a good-natured wager on the two schools' football teams had grown into an annual event. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't make it."

"You mean you were hoping I wouldn't," Tony laughed. "This is the first time in three years that my college team beat yours. I wouldn't miss this for anything."

"You're determined to get your revenge, aren't you?" Clif's face was wreathed in smiles.

"Damned right. Especially after last year's." His voice lowered. "Do you know what it felt like to wear clown makeup and ride an oversize tricycle in Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade?" Tony glanced around. "Ready?"

Clif bent to whisper to his aunt. "I have to leave for a little while, Marion. I'm sure you can entertain our guests."

When Clif and Tony reached the team locker room, it was empty. Looking around like a thief, Tony knocked on the office door. It was opened a crack by a thin young man.

"Do you have it?" Tony asked.

The young man nodded and pointed to a furry costume.

"If you'll let me off the hook, I'll make a sizable contribution to your favorite charity," Cliff offered.

Tony held up a hand. "No chance. You lost the bet."

Turning to the younger man, Cliff said, "Not a word of this to anyone. If there's even a hint, I'll have your job."

The young man nodded his assent, held out the costume.

WHILE THE team called a time-out, the announcer said, "The cheering you hear in the background is for our mascot, Wooly the Wolverine. Just listen to that crowd!"

"It's Wooly," Charley screeched above the din. "Mom, look. Wooly the Wolverine."

"He's cute," Alexandra admitted, watching his antics.

For a few moments, Cliff froze as the crowd began cheering. Then he remembered his reflection in the mirror. His own aunt wouldn't recognize him. Prancing toward the first section in the stadium, he waved to the crowd. Then, as Wooly did at every game, he picked up someone's baby, dressed in the team colors, and twirled him around before planting a kiss on his pudgy cheek and handing him back to his parents.

As he advanced to their section, Charley joined the crowd of waving, cheering fans. "He's coming this way, Mom!"

Handing an excited little boy a team banner, Cliff accepted his sticky handshake, and realized he was actually having a good time. A white-haired woman shook his hand, then impulsively hugged him. Touching a

furry paw to his mouth, he blew a kiss to the crowd. As he waved to the next section, his hand stopped in midair. One face in the front row arrested his attention.

If it weren't for the color of her hair, he'd have sworn it was someone else. But the tangled curls tumbling about her face and shoulders were unmistakable. Her green eyes were filled with laughter, her cheeks flushed from the autumn air. Instead of a tailored suit, she wore brown corduroy slacks, a white turtleneck and a brown suede jacket. Oh, yes. This was definitely the very proper Miss Porter.

Cliff's imagination raced. As long as he was protected by this ridiculous costume, he was going to have some fun with her.

He took a step closer, and the little girl beside her clutched her arm. Noticing her for the first time, he reached into his pocket, and withdrew a banner, then presented her with his gift. Throwing her arms around his neck, she hugged him fiercely.

"Oh, Wooly, thank you."

"You're welcome." Bending to her ear, he whispered, "You and your sister are the prettiest girls at the game."

She giggled, then looked up at the woman beside her.

"What did he say?"

Before she could reply, Cliff handed Alexandra a pennant.

"Thank you," she murmured, offering her hand.

Her palm was engulfed in a huge furry paw. Leaning closer, he whispered, "Wooly prefers kisses." Be-

fore she could refuse, he drew her to him and covered her mouth with his.

He had a quick impression of her haunting fragrance as he brought her against him. Then her lips, so soft and pliant he wanted to crush them. The hands that gripped his arms were surprisingly strong. There was depth here and strength, and something he couldn't quite fathom.

The kiss caught her completely off guard. With his painted whiskers and garishly smiling mouth, she'd expected a bland, impulsive kiss. What she found instead was a man's strength. Incredible strength.

Alexandra had once promised herself that her head would always rule her heart. She prided herself on being firm and decisive. But her reaction to this simple kiss puzzled her.

Reluctantly he drew back. He saw a quick look of stunned surprise before her eyes flashed fire.

Peering into the slate-gray eyes behind the mask, she had the unnerving sensation that she'd seen them before. Cool. Calculating. Arrogant. She shook her head. Impossible. She would never forget eyes like those.

FOR ALEXANDRA, the rest of the game was a blur of color and noise and taste. All of these seemed new and excitingly different. What had transpired between her and that...creature...had no bearing on the excitement of the day, she told herself. A single kiss couldn't make the air sweeter or the day sharper. No, the reason for her thrill of pleasure was that this time she was sharing everything with Charley.

At halftime they ate their way through a small pizza, then topped it off with chocolate-chip ice-cream bars. Wandering around the stadium, they stopped to admire the souvenirs.

"How about a sweatshirt?" Alexandra asked.

She saw her daughter's eyes widen. "You mean it?"

"Sure. Why not? Do you want the one with the team name, or the one with the picture of Wooly?" she asked.

"Wooly," Charley said decisively.

During the final half they munched pretzels and chips, washing everything down with two large root beers.

They cheered frantically as the Wolverines tied the score, then screamed until they were hoarse when one of the players kicked a field goal to win the game.

"THIS WAS the best day ever, Mom," Charley said, taping the Wolverine banner to the wall over her bed. The bright green sweatshirt was draped over her chair. It would be worn proudly to school the next morning. Pulling back the covers, Charley slid between the warm flannel sheets. "I wish we could do this every Sunday."

"If we did it every week, it wouldn't be special anymore. Besides, we'd each weigh a ton." Brushing her lips over Charley's cheek, Alexandra chuckled. "Not to mention the strain on the budget. But it was fun."

"And we got to meet Wooly." Charley giggled suddenly. "He thought we were sisters."

"Hmm. Is that what he whispered to you? Well, I could have corrected him on that, but... I got sidetracked."

"Yeah. He kissed you. He only hugged me." Charley's eyes were suddenly bright. "What was it like to kiss Wooly?"

Alexandra paused in the doorway. The mere mention of that kiss sent her pulse leaping. "Ever kiss a frog?" she quipped.

"That bad, huh?"

"Good night, pumpkin."

*

THERE HAD been a heavy frost during the night. Headlights and plumes of exhaust made an eerie pattern on the crowded expressway. They inched their way along until they reached the exit for Charley's school.

"I might be late tonight, honey. This is my first division meeting. I have no idea what to expect. Ask Milly to stay to dinner, if she'd like."

"Okay. Bye, Mom."

With a quick kiss, Charley slammed the car door and hurried to join her friends.

Sometimes it didn't seem fair, Alexandra thought, heading back onto the expressway. She'd never been there when her daughter came in from school. Thank heavens for Milly. That generous woman always managed to do more than she was paid to do. Alexandra thought of the special dinners, the times Milly just happened to bake too many cookies or cupcakes.

As she parked in the company lot and made her way to her office, Alexandra pushed aside her worries about home. For the next eight hours, all her concentration would be on Andrews Motors.

At exactly ten o'clock Alexandra rode the elevator to the executive offices. The walls were paneled in rich dark walnut; the carpet was a muted shade of beige.

The woman behind the desk reminded her of her eighth-grade teacher. Her smile was warm, genuine. "Miss Porter, I'm Martha James."

"Hello, Ms. James."

"Call me Martha." Alexandra felt the strength in the woman's handshake. "Mr. Andrews directed me to show you right in." She opened the double doors. "He has a long-distance call at the moment. Make yourself comfortable."

For long moments Alexandra stared around her. The president's office occupied one half of the top floor. A wall of glass wrapped around three sides, offering a breathtaking view of Detroit. An ivory tower, she thought.

The furnishings were sleek, contemporary pieces. In front of the desk were two swivel chairs in gray, black and red. Choosing the one on the left, she sat down, waiting for the telephone conversation to end.

Clif was aware of her from the moment she walked in. While the voice on the other end droned on, he watched her make a slow appraisal of his office.

"Thanks, Arthur. I will. Give my best to Lillian."

Replacing the receiver, he said, "Good morning, Miss Porter. Have you called a division meeting?"

"After lunch. My assistant is notifying the department heads right now."

Just listening to her made him feel good. "Fine. I have a full schedule today, but I'd like to attend. If I'm free, I'll drop by."

There was something familiar about Clif Andrews. It wasn't the deep voice, the curt delivery. There was something else vaguely familiar about him. She couldn't put her finger on it. And all of this could have been said on the telephone. She wondered why he had sent for her.

He stood. "Thanks for stopping by, Miss Porter. If there's time, I'll see you this afternoon."

She accepted his outstretched hand and felt the jolt. She hadn't imagined it that first time. It was happening again.

She could feel his cool gaze on her as she walked across the room and opened the door. When it closed, she rubbed her damp hand on her skirt, vainly trying to erase his touch.

THE MEETING was going badly. Alexandra wasn't certain just when or how she'd lost control. While she waited for a chance to interrupt, Mike argued with Bill Campbell about quality control. She realized Mike was only trying to run interference for her. Still, she resented it.

Rapping her hand on the table, she tried to restore order.

"Mike, I have a few questions of my own."

"...put my initials on an order, you can damn well bet I've given it my personal attention."

"Bill. Please. You've made your point. Now if you'll let—"

"Then how do you explain this slipup?" Mike demanded, waving a fistful of papers under Bill's nose.

"I can't explain it. The mistake didn't come from my department." Bill Campbell's voice thundered.

"All right, gentlemen," Alexandra cut in. "I want you both to cool down before you say another word. Bill, after the meeting I'd like to speak with you in my office." Seeing Mike's mouth open, she snapped, "Alone."

"I have every right—"

"At this moment, Mike, you haven't. I have the floor."

The two men glared at each other for a moment longer, but it was only after they were seated that a hushed silence fell over the room. Even before she saw Clif Andrews seated at the end of the table, Alexandra felt his presence. Power. It radiated from him.

"Emmet." Alexandra's voice softened as she addressed the man who had been her first boss at Andrews Motors. "I read your report on the new paint tests. It's impressive. Why don't you tell us about your findings?"

While Emmet delivered the report, Clif studied the woman at the head of the table. She wore her new title well. Though she had started at Andrews Motors while still in college, working her way up from the lowest-paying position there was an

aura of sophistication and breeding about her. The woman had style.

Alexandra glanced at her watch. The meeting had gone longer than she'd expected.

"Thank you, Emmet. If the final tests go as well as the preliminary ones, I'd say we've found the finish we've been searching for all these years. It may even be impervious to road salt. Wouldn't that make the consumer cheer?"

Everyone nodded.

"In case anyone hasn't noticed," Alexandra said, "our president joined us a while ago. Mr. Andrews, is there anything you'd care to add before we adjourn?"

Clif remained seated. "Nothing, Miss Porter. You seem to have handled everything."

She moistened her lips. "Bill, I'll see you in my office. Mike, you may as well go home. We can talk tomorrow morning. Thank you all, ladies and gentlemen. Good night."

As Bill Campbell picked up his report and headed toward her office, her assistant watched him with a scowl. Then he stormed out of the conference room.

Playing for time, Alexandra shuffled her reports, placing them in a file folder for her secretary. She was uncomfortably aware that Clif Andrews was still seated, watching her. Had he heard the raised voices? Was he already questioning his choice of division manager?

When she turned, he uncoiled himself from the chair. They both reached the door at the same time.

He reached for the handle, effectively stopping her. "I'd like a full

report tomorrow on this business between Mike and Bill."

She nodded. "As soon as I've sorted it out."

He inhaled the earthy scent of her perfume. "You handled yourself well in here."

"Thank you, Mr. Andrews."

"Clif."

Taken by surprise, she said quickly, "I prefer Mr. Andrews."

She glanced up and found herself staring into cool gray eyes. Calculating, arrogant eyes. In that instant something clicked in her mind. She let out a little gasp.

"It can't be. You!" The file folder dropped from her nerveless fingers, spilling paper about their feet. "I know those eyes." How could she have missed it?

"Do you now?" His eyebrows arched.

"I know I'm not mistaken. You're that mascot. Wooly."

His eyes narrowed. Damn his luck. "Very astute, Ms. Porter. But I'm not the mascot. I just pretended to be briefly. I... was paying off a bet."

"Of course." She gave him a measured look. "You lost a bet."

He swore. "I never expected anyone to guess my identity. I'm certain you'll understand that it must remain our little secret."

He watched the gleam in her eye. She was laughing. Behind that beautiful mask of composure, she was laughing at the thought of him in that costume.

Nibbling on her lower lip, she nodded. "I assure you that I can be trusted to keep your secret."

His frown deepened. "You'd better. I've already threatened the real mascot if he leaks even a whisper. The same goes for you, Miss Porter."

A new thought left her suddenly stricken. Her eyes widened with the realization. "Mr. Andrews, you took advantage of me. You . . . kissed me. You were laughing at me."

"Wrong, Miss Porter." He was standing so close to her that she could smell the clean lemony scent of his soap. "I was simply enjoying the fans and their jokes. I was laughing with them. And that kiss." She saw his gaze fall on her mouth. "Frankly, it was very public and very unsatisfactory. I'd like to try again."

He moved closer, still not touching her. She stiffened. She mustn't let him do this. Still, she waited, as if frozen to the spot.

He saw the fear in her eyes. It wasn't the effect he usually had on women, he thought, puzzled.

"I believe the word was *kiss*. I wasn't planning to beat you, Miss Porter." She heard the warmth of humor in his tone.

Deliberately bending nearer, he inhaled the exotic spicy fragrance that was uniquely hers. He saw her eyes widen, then shut tightly.

"Open your eyes, Miss Porter."

Her lids fluttered, then opened wide.

In that brief instant, he felt a sexual pull that clawed at his insides. Battling his own desire, Cliff stared down into her eyes and watched as they hardened. She lifted her chin, a sure sign that she was once again in control.

"If you'll excuse me, Mr. Andrews, I have an employee waiting in my office. I've kept him waiting long enough."

"This isn't over, Miss Porter."

She blinked. "Oh, but it is. And I'm sure you'll be gentleman enough to keep your distance."

"Don't bet on it."

"THERE's definitely a leak."

Frank Tuller held aloft the latest edition of *Wheels Magazine*. The board members listened intently.

"The facts and figures quoted came directly from our monthly report on auto emissions tests. That report hasn't even been circulated among the other divisions."

"You mean the leak is within Division Two?" Cliff scanned the contents of the article.

"It has to be," Tuller said vehemently. "No one else has access to this information."

"It's obvious to me," Marion broke in, "that heads ought to roll, beginning with the new manager." She'd been seething ever since she'd heard about the promotion.

"She's only been on the job a few weeks," Cliff said.

"That's enough time to leak test results." Marion sat straighter, enjoying the spotlight. "I think we should make an example of someone," she said. "I resent anyone who compromises Andrews Motors."

"A feeling we all share." Cliff strove to keep his temper. "If the board will approve, I'd like to hire a discreet investigator. I'd prefer to keep it from becoming a full-blown scandal."

"I agree," one of the vice presidents said quickly, eager to catch his plane to the coast.

Around the table, heads nodded in agreement.

"I'll put it in the form of a motion," the vice president said.

As the secretary took notes, the votes were tallied.

When the meeting broke up, Marion followed her nephew to his office. Closing the door behind her, she leaned against it.

"You don't seem worried about the leak." She clenched her hands at her sides. "If I were in charge..."

"I know, Marion," Clif said. "You'd cut off their heads."

Her lips thinned.

Clif was grateful for the ringing of his telephone.

"Excuse me." Lifting the phone, he swiveled his chair. When he heard his office door close, he sighed. "Thank you, Martha. I swear, sometimes you can read my mind."

She laughed. "I could see the fire in your aunt's eyes. I knew you were in for a long session if I didn't rescue you."

"Bless you. Have the notices about the monthly management assembly gone out?"

"They're being hand delivered right now."

MIKE waved the notice in front of Alexandra. "Monthly management assembly tonight. Are you going?"

Alexandra sighed. "Looks like I have no choice."

One of the managers had told Alexandra what to expect at her first monthly managerial meeting. There

would be a buffet dinner, with the meeting consisting mainly of a progress report from each division, followed by discussion of any problems. It usually broke up around ten o'clock.

Promptly at six, Alexandra entered the conference room and stood in line for the buffet. She helped herself to a salad and roll and made her way to the coffee urn.

"When I retire," a stocky man muttered beside her, "I'd like to get the coffee concession here. Bet I'd make a million."

Alexandra nodded. "If the company ever ran out of coffee, most of the employees would resign in protest."

"I'd be first in line," came a deep voice behind her.

Turning, she looked into the solemn eyes of Clif Andrews.

"Good evening, Mr. Andrews."

"Good evening, Miss Porter. Where are you sitting?"

"Anywhere there's room."

"Follow me." He picked up his tray and headed for a table that was nearly empty.

Alexandra had no choice but to follow.

"How's your job working out?" he asked casually.

"Fine."

"No problems?"

Alexandra thought about the copy of *Wheels Magazine* she'd found on Mike's desk. She was still too upset about the lead article to discuss it. "None I can't handle."

By the time most people had returned from the dessert table, the business meeting began. Alexan-

dra's report went smoothly and she was relieved to note that she wouldn't have to field any questions. The next manager took his place at the microphone.

Clif watched her walk to her chair. She had a way of moving, a way of holding her head that said "Keep away." She'd built a wall around herself, and only the boldest would dare to storm it. But there was nothing he enjoyed more than a challenge. He was going to break through to the real Alexandra Porter. And when he did, he intended to know everything there was about this very private lady.

Alexandra slid back her chair slightly. The man in front of her prevented a clear view of the podium. She refused to admit that she wanted to stare at Clif Andrews. She only wanted to memorize the names and faces of all the managers, she told herself firmly. Still, she studied the man who presided over the meeting.

Clif Andrews was an enigma. His elegant clothes, his aristocratic bearing, set him apart from all the others. Those cool glances and icy responses to his employees only added to his aloof image. Yet the humor she could detect beneath the surface puzzled her. Could it be that there was a heart beating within the ice sculpture?

Their eyes met. It was a moment of shocking intimacy. In that brief instant she felt a touch as strong as any physical contact. Power. She could feel it. He would be a dangerous adversary. Passion. He was a

man of deep passions. She sensed it. He would be an exciting lover.

Her mouth went dry. Where had those thoughts come from? He wasn't her enemy; he was her boss. And she had no intention of taking a lover. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Clif blinked. His thoughts dissolved. Someone had just asked him a question, and he hadn't even heard. Damn the woman! One look and he was lost. She was destroying his ability to concentrate.

*

ALEXANDRA loved Saturdays. There were no alarms, no schedules. There was time for a second cup of coffee. She sat at the kitchen table with the weekend paper. She was wearing faded jeans and a bright red sweatshirt that read, For This I Went to College? It had been Charley's gift to her for Mother's Day.

Hearing her daughter's light tread, she looked up.

"Isn't it a bit early for ballet practice?"

In her pink tights and leotard, Charley executed a shaky pirouette. "Milly's coming over in a little while to bake biscuits. We'll do our exercises while they're baking. I'm going to learn how to bake, too. Milly says your mother neglected that part of your education."

Alexandra winced, thinking of her mother's staff of servants who would have been horrified if a little girl had ever intruded in their kitchen.

"Milly's right. I'm glad she's around to fill in the gaps. But does this mean you're not coming to the grocery store with me?"

"Sorry. Next week."

Alexandra picked up her list. "See you in an hour."

IT WAS a perfect autumn day. The air was brisk, with just a hint of the weather to come.

As Alexandra turned into her driveway, she spotted the strange car and wondered who Milly was entertaining. Every salesman or poll-taker who knocked on the door was treated like company.

Lifting the heavy sacks of groceries, Alexandra pushed the door open with her hip and entered the kitchen. The aroma of something wonderful wafted from the oven. On the chopping block, Milly had all the ingredients for an exotic omelet.

"Good. You're back."

Alexandra turned toward the dining room. "The table is set with the good china."

"I didn't think you'd mind."

"I don't. Where's Charley?"

"Out back with our visitor."

"I hope it's at least a queen or a duke, considering the fuss."

Milly's eyes twinkled. "Better than that. It's your boss."

For a moment Alexandra was thunderstruck. Storming to the window, she lifted the curtain to see Charley, in her chinos and sweat-shirt, tossing a football to Clif Andrews. Jumping high, he neatly caught it. His T-shirt pulled away from faded denims, displaying a lean, flat stomach.

Alexandra found herself staring at a Clif Andrews she'd never seen before. Without his business suit and

tie, she was powerfully aware of his trim, athletic body.

Seeing him glance toward the window, Alexandra quickly dropped the edge of the curtain.

"Why did you let him in, Milly?"

"Why wouldn't I? You don't want me to be rude to your boss, do you?"

Alexandra hesitated beside the window. Clif had just changed all the rules of the game.

"Hey, Mom." Charley burst through the door with him. "Clif just showed me a neat trick about tossing the football."

"Clif? I see you two are on a first-name basis already."

"I wanted to call her Miss Porter, but she insisted on Charley," he joked.

Over her daughter's head, she studied Clif Andrews. Her voice frosted over. "What are you doing here?"

"Tossing the football to Charley," he said blandly.

"That isn't what I mean."

Charley turned from one to the other, watching their expressions.

"Oh, you mean what am I doing in here?" He gave her a lazy smile that did strange things to her heart. "Millicent promised us her special omelets when the game was over. What can I do to help, Millicent?"

"Not one thing," the housekeeper insisted. "You and Charley wash up. The omelets are done."

So were the waffles with blueberry sauce and walnut topping, Alexandra noted. There was also fresh orange juice and the rich fragrance of Milly's special coffee blend.

"You sit here, Clif," Charley said, indicating one end of the table. "My mom always sits there." She pointed to the other end. "And Milly and I will sit on each side."

"Isn't this cozy," Alexandra said, giving Clif a look that would kill.

"Just what I was thinking." He took a bite of the omelet. "Millificent, my compliments. It may be the best omelet I've ever tasted."

Clif poured on the charm. Milly was actually glowing.

"How about some orange juice, Clif?" Charley said. "I squeezed it."

He grinned. "It's terrific, Charley."

She beamed.

"And what did you contribute to this meal, Alex?" he asked.

She nearly choked. "Miss Porter," she said. "I contributed the money to buy the food."

"Very creative." His grin widened.

"Clif thought we might like to take a drive to the old cider mill later." Charley's eyes were shining. "He said they have the best cider and doughnuts in the whole world."

"Weren't you planning to go to Tracey's?"

"I can do that another time. I already called her."

Charley made it sound so important that Alexandra was at a loss to think of a graceful way to extricate herself from this situation without hurting her daughter.

"Come on, Mom," Charley chirped. "We've never been to the cider mill."

"I'll think about it," Alexandra said, "after I've had a chance to speak with Mr. Andrews alone."

"That means she's weakening," Charley said in a stage whisper as she took her empty plate to the kitchen.

Once they were alone, Clif took a moment to study his surroundings. From his vantage point, he could see into the foyer. An early Picasso of a mother and child hung above a red-lacquered Louis XV commode. Miss Porter hadn't bought that on her salary.

In the dining room, a portrait dominating one wall was of a beautiful woman with russet hair and emerald eyes.

"Your mother?"

"Grandmother."

"She's beautiful. It seems to be a family trait."

For a moment Alexandra almost smiled. But she was not about to waste any warmth on him. Taking a deep breath, she hissed, "How did you find my house?"

"I find it charming."

"That isn't what I mean, and you know it."

"I followed you last night."

Her cup clattered against the saucer. "Why?"

"Because I wanted to see you away from the office."

"All right. You've seen me. Satisfied?"

"Not yet."

Her gaze lifted at his low tone. "What else do you want, Mr. Andrews?" She stood, scraping back her chair, and strode to the window.

He said, "I didn't realize when I saw you at the game that Charley

was your daughter. I thought you were sisters."

"So now you know."

"I know that you have a delightful daughter and a . . . unique housekeeper."

"And now will you leave?"

"I'm afraid not. There's one more thing I have to know."

She released her breath in a long sigh. She'd been expecting this. She glanced up. His eyes were hard.

Meeting his cold look, she asked, "All right, Mr. Andrews. What is it?"

He sensed her fear and, thinking quickly, he decided to change tactics. "I need to know if Millicent is married."

Of all the things she was anticipating, this was the most off-the-wall question.

"Milly?" she sputtered. "Married? No. Why do you ask?"

"I think I've fallen in love with her," Clif whispered.

Alexandra collapsed into a fit of laughter. "Milly. You're in love with Milly." The laughter grew until she was nearly doubled over.

Clif joined in, then touched a thumb to her face as a tear trickled down her cheek. He loved the sound of her laughter.

"You know what they say. In this big world, there's someone for everyone. Now, about that trip to the cider mill . . ."

"I wouldn't miss it," she said between giggles. "And I'm sure Milly will be delighted. I've never had a chance to play matchmaker before. Charley and I will sit in the back seat."

He caught her by the shoulder. "I'll have to ask you to sit beside me. I don't think I could handle being that close to a woman who can cook like Millicent. There's no telling what I might do."

She mimicked his serious manner. "Good idea. I'll be happy to act as chaperon."

He inhaled her unique fragrance, and his smile vanished. In denims and sweatshirt she was more appealing than ever. Her hair swung soft and loose and he longed to plunge his hands into it, to draw her firmly against him, to crush her lips with his.

Footsteps alerted them that someone was coming.

"Are we going?"

Alexandra took a deep breath before replying. "Looks like it."

When Charley had finished shrieking her enthusiasm, Alexandra added, "Tell Milly she's included in the plans."

THE CIDER mill was a two-story building of weathered red clapboard perched on the side of a swollen creek, and surrounded by acres of apple orchards.

Clif parked the car, and with Charley running ahead, tugging on Milly's arm, they walked toward the mill.

"Does she ever walk?" Clif asked.

"Not if she can run." Alexandra laughed.

"She's delightful."

Alexandra wrinkled her nose. "I agree. Of course, I'm prejudiced. But I do think she talks too much."

"Unlike her mother, who is extremely closemouthed." He put a hand beneath her elbow. "Afraid of what she'll say."

Alexandra paused, ordering herself to show no emotion at his touch. Afraid? Or merely cautious? Once burned....

"Who hurt you, Alex?" It was a man, he knew instinctively. And he hated him.

He saw the look that came and went in her eyes. "Don't call me 'Alex.' My name is Alexandra. And my life is none of your business."

"Oh, lady, I intend to make it my business," he said.

Charley came bounding toward them. "We can take our cider and doughnuts out to the orchard. There are picnic tables and trails out there."

Clif bought a jug of fresh cider and half a dozen doughnuts, still warm from the oven. Under the shade of a gnarled apple tree, they sat and lazily enjoyed their fare.

By the time they headed for home, the dusk of evening was setting across the countryside. Charley's eyes were growing heavy.

To keep her mind off Clif, Alexandra forced herself to concentrate on his conversation with Milly.

"You actually danced on Broadway?"

"Only for a year." Milly's voice became animated. "I was the stand-in for the star of the Follies for six months, and I'd begun to think my break would never come. Then one night the star ran off with a violinist. The next thing I knew, I had my name in lights."

"That's wonderful. Why only a year?" Clif asked.

"My real love was the ballet. So when the show folded, I went back to the ballet corps in New York."

"Did you ever get to dance the lead?"

Milly's voice lowered. "That was my dream. It took me years, but finally I was offered the lead in *Romeo and Juliet*."

"You must have been so proud to dance that part."

"I never danced it," Milly said. "I met Ben." There was a smile in her voice. "And suddenly nothing else mattered. Not even dancing the lead in *Romeo and Juliet*."

"You don't sound sorry about your decision."

"Sorry?" Milly laughed. "That man made me feel like the most important woman in the whole world."

Clif glanced at Alexandra's profile in the darkness. "You're a lucky lady, Milly. Not everyone finds a great love in his or her life."

"I know."

Alexandra kept her face averted and felt the sting of tears. Love. It was such a dangerous emotion. She turned to glance at the man beside her. She'd discovered unexpected facets of him today. Although she still resented his intrusion, the day had been fun. It was obvious that her daughter adored his attentions and Milly talked to him like an old friend.

When Clif turned off the ignition, she was startled to find they were home.

"You'll come in for coffee, Clif?"

Milly asked.

He was about to refuse when he caught sight of Alexandra's little frown of annoyance. "I'd like that."

Stifling a yawn, Charley opened the back door. "I wish I was little again, so you'd carry me, Mom."

Clif grinned. "Come on, Charley. Climb on my back. I'll give you a ride to the house."

Once inside, Milly told Clif, "Make yourself comfortable," as Alexandra led Charley upstairs.

Trailing Milly to the kitchen, Clif leaned against the doorway.

"How old is Charley?" he asked.

"Eight. Isn't she something?"

"Yeah. Something." Clif was silent a moment. From personnel records, he knew that Alexandra was twenty-six. That meant she'd been only eighteen when Charley was born.

Alexandra finally sailed down the stairs. "Poor Charley. She was asleep the minute her head hit the pillow."

"The coffee's ready," Milly said, pouring only two cups.

"You aren't staying?" A look of panic darted into Alexandra's eyes.

"Can't. All that walking did me in. I'm going home to soak in a warm tub. I'll see you in the morning. Clif—" Milly turned and offered her hand "—this was fun. I hope I see you again."

"You can count on it. Good night, Millicent."

Alexandra placed the cups on the table.

"Cream or sugar?"

"Black."

He watched as she moved around the kitchen.

"Did you bake these biscuits?"

She turned. "Milly and Charley made them. I don't bake."

He buttered a biscuit and bit into it. "Wonderful."

She took a seat across from him.

"What other things don't you do?" he asked softly. "You don't bake. You don't say much. You don't let anyone get close to you. What else?"

Her tone hardened. "I don't tolerate intrusions into my personal life. And I don't answer impertinent questions."

"You've erected a fence and hung out a No Trespassing sign, Alex."

"Then I'd appreciate it if you would respect my wishes."

He drained his coffee and stood. "All right. Sorry for the inconvenience. The truth is, I had a great time."

As he strode to the front door, she followed him.

"Clif, please excuse my manners." She sighed. "Charley and Milly had a wonderful time today. Thank you."

"And you?"

He saw her bite her lip. "I enjoyed myself."

Leaning his back against the door, he said, "There. That didn't hurt, did it?"

Her eyelids fluttered and she saw a slight smile appear on his lips. As he took a step closer, the fear leapt back into her eyes.

He extended his hand. "I was simply going to suggest a friendly handshake."

She let out a shaky breath. With a weak smile she offered her hand. It was engulfed in his.

"Good night, Miss Porter."

"Good night, Mr. Andrews."

He thought about taking her into his arms and crushing her lips with his. He thought about how it would feel to have her soft body pressed against him. But he banked his own needs. What she needed was to trust again. If he was patient, he could earn that trust.

He held her hand a moment longer. He wasn't a patient man. But he was a man who knew what he wanted and how to get it.

*

"I THINK you'll be interested in this little item," Marion said, thrusting a newspaper in front of her nephew.

Clif read quickly, then glanced up at her.

"Where did you get this?"

"Frank Tuller picked it up in New York yesterday."

"Why didn't he come to me? He knows I'm conducting an investigation into these leaks."

"Maybe Frank agrees with me that you're being too soft on this issue. I think you may be getting too...emotionally involved to be objective."

Clif sat back in his chair. "Say what you mean, Marion."

"Frank took his grandson to an old cider mill last Saturday. He said he could have sworn he passed you and that Miss Porter driving away."

Clif stood. "My private life is just that, Marion. What I choose to do

away from the office is my business."

"Not if it colors your judgment," she said quickly.

He spoke quietly. "When it comes to this company, I can be as ruthless as anyone. Believe me, Marion, my...friendship with an employee will never come before the good of our shareholders."

"How reassuring. Then I can assume you will ask your...friend, Miss Porter, for her resignation?"

"If and when she is proven guilty."

"I have your word on that?"

The words came out in a hiss. "You have my word on it."

"I CAN'T believe I let you talk me into this." Alexandra scowled at Charley's reflection beside her in the mirror.

"Clif said he'll do all the cooking. Can you fix this ponytail?"

Alexandra tugged on her daughter's hair. "This is the last time I'm going to allow you to take my phone calls. What I'd like to know is how Clif Andrews found out that Milly was out of town this weekend."

"I told him." Charley added, "I told him you were in the shower. Then he asked if we'd had dinner yet. I told him we'd probably make grilled-cheese sandwiches." She wrinkled her nose. "Your specialty. And that's when he invited us over."

"And you accepted his invitation without first checking with me. What if I'd already made other plans?"

"You never make plans without me for the weekend, Mom."

Alexandra paused to study her daughter. It was true.

"Come on, Mom. Clif said he was going to start the grill right away." She turned. "Oh. And he said to bring a bathing suit."

"In this weather?" Alexandra gazed at the dreary rain. "You can bring your suit if you want, but I prefer warm slacks and an even warmer sweater."

Charley stuffed her bathing suit into the pocket of her sweatshirt. "Just in case," she said.

Driving slowly along the curving Lakeshore Drive, Alexandra had no trouble finding the Andrews estate. The house, a lovely, sprawling three-story building of English Tudor design, had weathered three generations gracefully. A circular drive led to wide front steps lined with pots of bright late-blooming flowers.

"Ooh. Is this Clif's house, Mom?"

Alexandra nodded and fought down the fluttering in her stomach. She was no stranger to her boss's lifestyle. She had turned her back on it years ago.

Charley was out of the car and running up the steps. A formally dressed man opened the door.

"Mr. Andrews is expecting you, ladies. My name is Burtan. I'll show you the way."

The kitchen was at the back of the house. A floor of gleaming black-and-white tiles and walls and cabinets of pristine white gave an impression of space. Over an island counter, pots, pans and utensils hung in casual disarray. Standing at the

sink, sleeves rolled above his elbows, was Clif.

As they paused in the doorway, a bundle of fur hurtled toward them. Seeing Charley, the pup threw himself into her arms, then stood on its hind legs to lick her face.

"Ooh, Mom. A puppy. Isn't he beautiful?"

"This is MacLaren," Clif said. "He's a Sheltie. That's a Shetland Sheepdog. They've been bred in Scotland for generations."

"Oh, MacLaren," Charley said, throwing her arms around his neck, "you're going to lick me to death."

Clif laughed. As he turned to Alexandra, his smile deepened. "I'm glad you were able to come."

"Charley didn't leave me much choice. You're very good at this, aren't you?"

"What?" he asked innocently.

"Making plans with my daughter, then acting as though I'm a villain if I don't go along."

He smiled. "Is that what I do?"

She shot him a knowing look.

"Did you bring your bathing suit?"

Charley bounded across the room. "I did. But Mom said it's too cold to go swimming."

"Not in my pool." Catching Charley's hand, he said, "Come on. I'll show you. In this house, we can swim all year long."

The southern side of the house had been transformed into a solarium. Three walls of glass looked out onto formal gardens. In the center of the room a free-form pool shimmered. Trees and rose bushes in containers were arranged around it,

as well as a profusion of potted plants.

"Oh, Clif, this is beautiful," Alexandra said.

He was oddly pleased. "I had this added a few years ago," he said. "With Michigan's short summer, it seemed more practical to have a pool indoors. I like daily physical exercise."

It showed, she thought.

"Can I swim in it?" Charley asked excitedly.

"That's what it's here for," Clif remarked. "You can change in that room."

DINNER was wonderful. Clif had tossed a garden salad with his own blended dressing. He cooked perfect steaks on an indoor grill. With them, he served steaming baked potatoes topped with sour cream.

"Let's have our dessert in front of the fireplace," he urged, carrying a tray of fruit and warm chocolate fondue into the living room.

A crackling fire was burning in a great stone fireplace. Outside, rain lashed the windows. Inside, they were content to be dry and warm.

Charley nibbled chocolate-covered cherries and strawberries while Clif and Alexandra sipped glasses of dry red wine.

"That was really wonderful, Clif. I never expected you to be such a good cook."

"You mean I managed to surprise you?"

He'd been a surprise from the first moment she'd met him, she thought with sudden insight.

"Do you live here all alone, Clif?" Charley asked drowsily.

"Mmm-hmm."

"Do you have a mom and dad?"

He shook his head. "They died a couple of years ago."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"Enough questions, Charley," Alexandra said.

"I don't mind." Clif leaned back, stretching his legs toward the fire.

"No brothers or sisters. Just me."

"It's a good thing you have MacLaren," she said, snuggling down beside the puppy.

For long moments Clif studied the little girl and the sleeping puppy. Then he asked, "Ready for some coffee?"

Alexandra nodded.

"I'll be right back."

While he was gone, Alexandra studied her surroundings. This room, like the kitchen and the solarium, suited the man who lived here. A man of many tastes and moods, Alexandra thought. But a man who could be content to be surrounded by a loving family.

Clif returned with a tray containing a silver coffee service. Alexandra poured and handed him a cup.

"I believe you take yours black," she said, turning to him with a smile. "Your home is beautiful, Clif. Have you had to do much remodeling?"

"Quite a bit. These old mansions tend to have a lot of rooms that seem archaic today. So the ballroom now houses an indoor pool. And the music room is the great room."

She sipped her coffee. "Did you ever want to be anything besides the president of Andrews Motors?"

Clif leaned back, smiling. "When I was very young, I wanted to be a sculptor. My grandmother was an artist, and my grandfather was a...tinkerer. That's how he happened to build an engine that revolutionized the automobile industry."

Setting his cup down, he caught her hand and brought it to his lips. "But enough shoptalk. Tell me about Alexandra Porter."

"A boring story," she said with a laugh.

"Then bore me. Do you have any family besides Charley?"

"My father and mother live on the West Coast. There are an aunt and uncle and several cousins. We're... not close."

He heard the slight tremor in her voice and decided not to pursue the subject. "No brothers or sisters?"

She shook her head. "Like you, I'm an only child."

"It has its disadvantages, don't you think?"

She glanced down at the hand holding hers. "I've always wanted to be part of a large family."

"I had a friend in college who invited me to his home for spring break one year." Clif's voice warmed. "There were eight of them. They didn't really need anyone else to have fun. But they were so warm, so loving that they made a guest feel like family. I decided then and there that I would be surrounded by lots of children and grandchildren."

Alexandra laughed. "How old are you, Clif?"

"Thirty-one."

"You'd better get started soon. Have you found a woman willing to give you eight children?"

"Not yet. But I'm looking."

"You mean you're looking for a girl just like the girl who married dear old dad?"

His eyes crinkled with laughter. "My mother preferred tennis, bridge and afternoon cocktails at the club."

Without thinking, Alexandra murmured, "I know the type. You've just described my mother."

Clif arched an eyebrow. This was the first time Alexandra Porter had revealed anything at all about her personal life. It was a start. The first chink in that wall.

Glancing at her sleeping daughter, she said softly, "I'd better get Charley home."

Glancing at the girl and dog, Clif said, "That's the first time MacLaren hasn't whined in his sleep. He still misses his mother."

"Now you have the secret. Let him fall asleep with your arm around him."

"Given a choice," he murmured, drawing her closer, "I'd rather fall asleep with my arms around you." He pressed his lips to her temple.

Instantly the heat flared, coloring her cheeks.

"Don't start again, Clif."

"It started the first time I saw you, Alex."

"I have to go." She rose, but so did Clif and he pulled her into his arms.

Staring into her eyes, he ran his hands seductively along her shoulders. "I fall asleep thinking of you. And I wake wanting you, Alex."

You," he sighed, running soft, whispering kisses across her forehead, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. "Not some imaginary lover." He circled her ear with his tongue and felt her tense beneath him.

Running openmouthed kisses along the column of her throat, he felt her pulse fluttering. Knowing the fears she harbored, he wanted to be gentle. But he felt his control slipping. "Why do you have to be so beautiful? So unattainable?" On a groan, his mouth savaged hers.

They clung, mouth to mouth, each needing to taste the other. Their desires drove them to a fever pitch.

Plunging his hand deeply into her tangled hair, he whispered against her mouth, "Try to tell me you don't want this, Alex."

"Clif." She had to resist. She had to make him understand how important it was for her to remain in control of herself. A sob threatened to choke her. "No. Please, Clif. Please stop."

He tensed. The hands at her back stilled. Taking in a deep breath, he lifted his head to stare into eyes the color of a stormy sea. Passion, desire, fear—all were evident in her gaze. He could read her wild turmoil.

"You don't mean that."

"Yes." The single word threatened to choke her. For emphasis she shook her head, and with shaking fingers she wiped a tear away. She wouldn't cry. She had vowed many years ago never again to cry over a man.

He caught her by the shoulders and stared into her eyes.

"Leave your car here. I'll drive you and Charley home."

"That isn't necessary. I can manage." On legs that felt like rubber, she walked over to Charley.

Behind her, Clif stood motionless, feeling the intense energy drain from him gradually. He'd never known such need.

*

"WE HAVE eliminated the following employees from suspicion," the investigator said, handing Clif a sheet of typed paper. "As you can see, Mr. Andrews, we've narrowed the field considerably."

Clif scanned the list, feeling a tightening around his heart at the exclusion of Alexandra's name. He'd hoped she would be cleared before this investigation went any further. Wordlessly he handed the list to his aunt. Marion had insisted on being included in this briefing.

"What do you think is the motive?" she demanded.

The investigator folded his hands. "I call it the two Gs. Grudge or Greed. Money is usually the moving force. A competitor finds a key employee of yours who is living beyond his means. They make him a tempting offer."

Marion's voice purred. "So if an ambitious young manager happened to want a life that's been denied her, she might be tempted to sell out the company."

Clif shot his aunt a warning look. Turning to the detective, he said,

"Or it could be someone who bears a grudge?"

"It could be, Mr. Andrews. There's always that possibility. In either case, the name of the game is greed." The man stood. Offering his hand, he added, "We're very close to wrapping this up." He paused at the door. "That thought ought to make your holidays brighter."

When the door closed behind him, Marion returned the list to her nephew. "Four more employees have been eliminated. I noticed your Miss Porter remains a suspect."

Though he said nothing, she noted the grim line of his mouth. She stood. "I haven't seen much of you lately, Clif," she said, adding ominously, "In this town, a man's private life doesn't remain private very long."

At his icy look, she moved toward the door, then turned. "Will you be attending the Lake Tahoe conference with your division heads?"

"I have no choice."

She brightened. "I haven't decided whether to attend. I want to see if anyone...interesting will be there. I'll be in touch."

When the door closed, he sat staring at a spot on the wall.

AT THE frantic pounding on the door, Alexandra hurried to open it. Clif, acting very mysterious, had picked up Charley while Alexandra was still drinking her Saturday morning coffee. They'd been gone nearly two hours.

"Mom. Look what we bought."

Clif was hauling an enormous Scotch pine up the steps.

"What in the world...?"

"Your Christmas tree," he said, grinning like a schoolboy. "Charley and I decided we couldn't wait any longer."

"But it's so big."

Alexandra and Charley fumbled with the branches, lifting and turning until the giant tree was through the doorway and into the living room.

While Charley ran to find newspapers and an old sheet, Clif returned with a tree stand and a small handsaw. They knelt over the tree, pruning branches, sawing the trunk in a clean line.

"Mom. Why don't you go find the ornaments? Clif and I have a lot of work to do here."

Alexandra climbed to the attic and returned with a dust-covered box. The tree stood in the corner, dominating the room. A wonderful pine scent filled the house.

"Let's hurry and get the ornaments up, Clif."

He smiled. "These things can't be rushed, Charley. A tree this grand calls for patience. First," he said, "I think the brave tree-cutters deserve a hot meal."

"Will soup and sandwiches do?"

"I think that would save us from starvation."

As Alexandra left the room, Charley said, "It'll be tomato soup and grilled-cheese sandwiches."

"How do you know?"

She grinned. "It's the only thing Mom can make."

Twenty minutes later, Alexandra called them to the kitchen. Clif winked at Charley. "I'll be darned.

Tomato soup. What kind of sandwiches are you making?"

"Grilled cheese," Alexandra said from the stove.

"Amazing. Your daughter's psychic. She told me what you'd fix."

"Any grumbling in the ranks," Alexandra said, "and you won't get seconds." She put the kettle on for tea.

Clif reached for a second sandwich. "These are good. What else do you make?"

"Peanut butter and jelly. And a great fried-egg sandwich."

"Didn't they teach home economics in your school?"

Alexandra smiled. "Yes. But I opted for auto mechanics."

"And Andrews Motors is grateful."

"Come on," Charley said. "We have a lot of work to do, Clif."

"Right." He picked up his plate and placed it in the dishwasher. "Where's Milly?"

Alexandra shrugged. "She drove to Chicago again this week. Her sister hasn't been well."

"I hope it's nothing serious."

Alexandra sighed. "She hasn't said much. But I think Milly's really worried. I should know more tomorrow."

Clif closed the dishwasher. "As long as we don't have Milly around, I'll be the cook tonight."

"Who said you were invited to stay?"

He ran a finger down her nose, and saw her eyes widen in surprise. Then he caught her hand and led her to the living room. "I'm inviting myself."

"OREGANO," Clif called. "It needs oregano." He sprinkled, stirred, tasted, then nodded. "Perfect. Here." He lifted the wooden spoon to her lips.

Alexandra tasted. "I think you're amazing. Where did you ever learn to cook like this?"

"My college roommate's family owned a chain of Italian restaurants. Papa Linguini's." He grinned. "He had the most amazing recipes. On weekends we used to throw parties that were the talk of the campus."

"I can see you were a dedicated student."

"Dedicated to having a good time. How about you?"

"After class I worked. And there was Charley."

She had spoken very simply. There was no regret in her voice, yet Clif had an almost overpowering impulse to take her in his arms and kiss away the pain.

A short time later they sat down to a wonderful meal of pasta with spicy tomato sauce and salad, accompanied by warm garlic bread.

Charley said earnestly, "Milly will be jealous when I tell her Clif's the best cook in the world."

"I think you'd better keep that comment to yourself," Alexandra mused.

"But I thank you for the compliment," he said, chuckling. "How about having our dessert and coffee in the living room, where we can admire our tree?"

In the front room, they plugged in the multicolored lights.

"It needs something," Clif commented.

"The angel." Alexandra fetched a tissue-wrapped figure. Unwrapping it, she handed it to Charley. "I think you should place the angel on top."

Clif picked her up and lifted her high in the air. "Wow!" she cried, setting the porcelain angel on the highest branch.

Seeing her daughter in Clif's arms, Alexandra felt a twinge of regret. They were so natural with each other. A father image was the one thing that had been missing in Charley's life. What would happen when Clif walked away?

Angrily she dismissed the fear. He was good company. Nothing more.

The three of them stood back, admiring.

"It still needs something," Clif muttered.

"Popcorn."

Clif and Charley looked at Alexandra.

"I'll get out the corn popper. We'll string popcorn. It makes a wonderful decoration for the tree."

"ONE MORE strand should do it," Clif called a while later as he draped another string of popcorn around the tree.

"I'm afraid it's going to have to wait," Alexandra said softly.

As Clif turned, she pointed to her daughter, whose head bobbed slightly over the popcorn bowl.

"Come on," Clif said, lifting Charley gently in his arms. "We have to save something for another day. Time for bed."

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she gave a last glance at the glittering tree. "It's the best tree we've ever had, Clif."

"Wait till you see the one we get next year," he murmured. "It'll be even better."

Struck by his words, Alexandra went rigid. Next year. He had spoken those words as casually as if their future was already settled. What a lovely dream. She berated herself. She'd let down her guard and allowed him to get too close. Despite all her precautions, she'd fallen in love with Clif Andrews. Fool. Hadn't she already had a taste of that kind of foolishness? She swallowed. It was time to be honest with Clif and send him on his way.

She paused, staring silently at his broad shoulders as he climbed the stairs. Then she followed.

Clif deposited Charley in her bed and touched his lips to her cheek. "Night, Clif," she mumbled as he walked from the room.

Her mother helped her slip out of her clothes. Minutes later, she was sound asleep.

Downstairs, Clif poured two glasses of pale wine. The only illumination came from the tiny jeweled tree lights.

At the sound of Alexandra's footsteps, he turned with a smile. Seeing her stiff features, he watched her, puzzled.

"We have to talk, Clif."

She refused a glass of wine. "What I have to say requires a clear head. And no interruptions."

She paced the room, then turned to face him.

"Charley has begun to look forward to your visits."

A smile tugged at his lips. "And you haven't?"

She tossed her head. "Yes. I... I enjoy having you here, too. But it's Charley I'm worried about. She's so young, so vulnerable. I won't have her hurt."

"How am I going to hurt her?"

"She's going to learn to count on you. And then one day you'll walk out of her life, as easily as you walked in."

He went very still. "Is that what happened, Alex?"

"We're talking about you, Clif. Not me."

"We seem to be talking about your expectations, Alex. Do you feel there can be no happy endings?"

He saw her lower lip tremble and thought her eyes filled with tears, but she swung away quickly.

With her back to him, she said, "I gave up believing in happy endings a long time ago. I can cope with reality and I want Charley to be able to deal with it, too."

"Just what is reality, Alex?" His tone was softer now.

"Reality is having your own parents turn against you when you make a mistake. Reality is having to get up at dawn to study for exams because your baby is teething and couldn't settle down to sleep. Reality is taking a second part-time job because one job just won't pay the bills."

"What about Charley's father? Has he offered to help?"

He saw her stiffen. "Charley has no father."

"Alex, it takes two—"

"I know what it takes," she spat. "I found out the hard way." In a monotone, she said, "It's a story as old as time. I was young and innocent. And he was very persuasive. The minute I gave in, he lost interest. And when I found myself carrying his child, he suggested that there were others to share the guilt. He knew better, of course. But I knew I wanted no further contact with him. I never saw him again."

Clif stood quietly, hating the nameless, faceless man who had inflicted such pain. "Your family..."

"My mother called me unspeakable names and suggested that I'd caused my father's heart attack. They were horrified that I intended to keep my baby and accused me of wanting to humiliate them publicly. Within six months they had sold everything here and moved to the West Coast."

"Where did you go?"

"Gram took me in, even though she'd just lost her husband." Alexandra blinked back tears. "My mother never forgave her for it. She accused my grandmother of corrupting my morals. Gram gave me this gatehouse." Alexandra's eyes softened. "And a summer cottage on Torch Lake. I've been meaning to take Charley there. Someday it will be hers. Both properties were an outright gift before Gram's death. They weren't part of her estate."

Alexandra wrapped her arms about herself and was surprised at how cold her hands were. Clif fought the desire to hold her. Walking closer, he handed her a glass of wine.

"Here. You're shivering."

Taking a sip of the pale liquid, she glanced up. "Now that you've heard my story, you can leave."

"Why would I leave?"

"Because you know the truth."

As she watched in surprise, he took her glass and placed it on a table. Then he took her in his arms. With his lips pressed to her forehead, he murmured, "Thank you for telling me. You didn't have to."

"Yes, I did. You deserved that much."

"But I want more, Alexandra. Much more."

As she opened her mouth to protest, he covered her lips in a searing kiss. His lips were warm, persuasive. The hands at her back were strong and firm. He moved his mouth to her cheek, to the sweep of her eyebrow, to the little pulse at her temple. Soft, feathery kisses soothed away her fears.

Slowly her hands curled into the front of his shirt. Her arms reached up to circle his neck. His lips covered hers, warm and sweet.

His hand slid under her sweater. He cupped her breast and heard her sudden intake of breath. She was small and firm and perfectly formed. As he took the kiss deeper, he lost all ability to think.

Her soft scent surrounded him, seducing him. "I want you, Alexandra." The words were torn from his throat. "I want all of you. Your heart, your mind, your body."

Alexandra's heartbeat thundered in her ears. "No." She took a step backward. Her legs were like rubber, and the floor seemed to tilt and sway. "Never."

"Don't deny what we both feel." He caught her by the arm, but she spun away.

"I want you to leave, Clif."

His voice lowered dangerously. "The hell you do. I'm good for you, Alex. For you and Charley."

"Leave her out of it. Don't play games with me, Clif. Just leave."

He took a step closer, his voice a low rasp of fury. "I don't want to leave, Alex. I want to stay. Tonight and every night. I want to be with you and Charley."

Her green eyes were dark with anger. "No more sweet words. No more empty promises. Just go, Clif. I've allowed this to go too far. From now on, our relationship is strictly business."

His features were grim. But something in his eyes spoke of determination. "We'll see about that."

Long after he'd stalked from the house, she continued to stand in the center of the living room. The only sound was her unsteady breathing as she fought back her tears.

"I HATE to ask this, Milly, but I'm expected to attend a conference next week. Will you be here?"

"The timing is perfect. My sister is waiting for the results of her latest tests. She'll spend the week resting from her trip to the hospital. So Charley can spend the whole week at my place."

"That's wonderful. I really appreciate this, Milly."

"Where will you be going?"

"Lake Tahoe."

"How romantic." Milly sighed. "Ski trails, sleigh bells, roaring fires."

"Try workshops, panel discussions and dry speeches. I'll probably never even find time to leave the hotel."

"Make the time."

As she picked up her briefcase, Alexandra wondered how she would handle being in the same hotel with Clif. Fortunately, they wouldn't be flying out together. She heard that he was leaving early on the company jet, and she was taking a commercial flight a day later.

When she reached the office, Alexandra found Bill Campbell standing just inside her door.

"Looking for me, Bill?"

He glanced up quickly. "Your assistant. Where is he?"

"Maybe he's getting some coffee. I'll tell him you're looking for him."

Sitting down, Alexandra sorted through her mail. She found a memo requesting her presence in the president's office at noon, then tore open an envelope marked Top Secret Test Results and scanned the report. When she was done, she took a small key from her briefcase and unlocked a drawer. Filing the secret document, she locked it and attacked the rest of the mail.

"Good afternoon, Miss Porter. Mr. Andrews is expecting you. Please go right in."

"Thank you, Martha."

"Oh, Martha." Marion brushed past Alexandra. "I must see my nephew right away."

"I'm sorry. He has an appointment. If you'd care to wait..."

"I'll only be a minute. I'm sure you don't mind." Giving Alexandra a measured look, Marion motioned for a beautiful blond woman to follow her.

"Clif, you remember Marguerite Van Horn. She was your guest at a football game a while back."

Her words brought an unexpected stab to Alexandra's midsection. Jealousy? It was a feeling she sought instantly to reject.

"Marguerite and I thought it would be fun to get in some skiing. So we've decided to go with you to the conference. I'm sure you won't mind if she comes along on the company plane."

Clif barely glanced up. "That's fine, Marion. Miss Van Horn is welcome. Now if you'll excuse me."

Marion went on, "I thought you'd join us for lunch."

"Maybe another time. I'm too busy today."

For some strange reason Alexandra felt a rush of relief.

"I think a trip to Tahoe will do you good, Clif," Marion huffed. "We'll teach you how to have fun."

Turning, Marion gave Alexandra a last lingering look before leading her guest back to the elevators.

Alexandra went in. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Andrews?"

How long was she going to continue this game? he wondered. "Yes, Miss Porter. Have a seat. As you know, the final test results are in from Emmet's department."

"Yes. My copy arrived this morning."

"Since we won't have time to discuss the outcome of these tests until we return, I'd prefer that they not be discussed with personnel from the other divisions at the conference."

She nodded. "All right. Will there be anything else?"

She saw the hardness come into his eyes. "Nothing else."

As she walked to the door, he said, "What arrangements have you made for Charley while you're away?"

She turned. "She isn't your concern."

"I know that, damn it," he snapped. "I just wondered if Milly was still in Chicago."

"She's back. She'll keep Charley at her place for the week."

He nodded. "I'm glad."

Don't be, she thought. Don't care about us. In time, we'll all go back to the way we were. Before I realized I love you.

Without another word, Alexandra closed the door.

HER briefcase had been rifled. One look, and Alexandra knew that someone had rearranged the papers. She reached farther, and her fingers froze. The drawer key was missing.

"Spring cleaning?" Mike asked, walking into her office.

"Someone stole my key." She looked up, exasperated.

Seeing a glint near his feet, Mike bent and picked up a small silver key. "This it?"

"Oh." She gave a sigh of relief. "My lifesaver. Thanks." Had she, in her haste, dropped the key this morning? As she stared at the jumble of papers on her desk she mut-

tered, "I wish I hadn't been so quick to dump all this." Now she wasn't so sure her papers had been rearranged.

"I'll help you."

"Did you see anyone in my office while I was out?"

"No." Mike paused. "Wait. I did see Bill Campbell walking out a while ago."

"He was looking for you," she said absently. "I forgot to tell you."

"Odd," Mike said. "He didn't mention it."

As he went back to his desk, Alexandra paused. There were too many coincidences. On her return, she would have to report her suspicions to the board.

*

ALEXANDRA had never seen anything quite so glorious. The hotel was a granite-and-glass contemporary design nestled in the basin of a crystal lake. Behind it towered the Sierra Nevada. At dawn she stood at the window, watching streaks of mauve and pink slash the horizon, and enjoying a leisurely cup of coffee in her room. Within an hour, her workday would begin; it would end only after a late-night buffet and speeches.

The week had passed quickly. Although she often saw Cliff seated with other executives, she'd had no opportunity to speak to him. Often she found herself wondering if he went skiing with his aunt and the beautiful blonde. Twice she had seen them at dinner with a host of other executives. The elegant woman looked as

if she'd always belonged in his world of success and luxury.

Today would be her last day here. She showered and dressed quickly, checking her schedule.

As she walked toward the elevators, she heard the bell and slipped inside just as the doors were closing. She found herself face-to-face with Clif Andrews.

"Good morning."

She mentally cursed the flush that colored her cheeks. He looked wonderful. His hair still glistened from a recent shower. He smelled faintly of tangy after-shave. "Good morning."

"Have you been having a good time?"

She'd smile if it killed her. "Wonderful. And you?"

"Great. Very relaxing."

When he touched her arm, she pulled back.

"What time is your flight, Alex?"

She swallowed. "Nine o'clock."

"Have a drink with me before you leave."

"There isn't time." She couldn't allow herself to be alone with him.

"Make time," he said through clenched teeth.

Alexandra's thoughts flew to Milly. Make time. Hadn't Milly given her that same advice?

THE CLOSED suitcases rested beside the bed.

Alexandra studied her reflection in the mirror, wondering if Clif would see the fear in her eyes. She was a fool to go to his suite, she told herself. But she wanted to see him.

The woman in the mirror was sophisticated without being sleek. Her dress was of emerald silk, with a softly draped bodice and a very low back. Over it, she wore a matching silk jacket. The pearls at her throat and earlobes had been her grandmother's. She had swept her hair into a coil at the back of her head.

"RIGHT on time," Clif said, opening the door on her first knock.

"I can't stay long," she said. "The closing dinner is in an hour."

"I'll take your jacket. It's warm in here."

Alexandra began to remove her jacket, then thought better of it. "I'll keep it on. I'm feeling chilly."

Clif poured two glasses of champagne. "Maybe this will warm you."

She accepted and felt a tiny thrill as their fingers touched. Glancing up, she felt a momentary jolt at the look in his slate eyes. There was something unreadable there.

"Would you like to try the caviar? Maybe the Brie?" He held out a tray of hors d'oeuvres.

"No, thank you." She'd choke on them, she thought. She shouldn't have come. This was too painful.

"Have you had a chance to try the slopes?"

She shook her head. "No time."

"How about the gaming tables?"

She smiled. "It took me about five minutes to lose twenty dollars at a blackjack table. I decided I work too hard for my money to be a gambler."

He chuckled. "What you need is a good-luck charm."

"Do you have one?"

"I am one. Everything I touch at the tables turns to gold."

"I'll remember that next time I'm coming to Tahoe."

"Why not take advantage of my offer this trip?"

She took a step away. He was too close, too virile. "There's no time left to gamble. The trip's almost over."

"We could change that."

She went very still. "My flight leaves tonight."

"Tickets can be changed. I'm asking you to stay the weekend with me."

"Clif, we've been over all this. When are you going to..."

"We're in Nevada, Alexandra. There's a little wedding chapel just down the street."

"Wedding...?"

Clif took the glass from her hand and set it down. Catching her hands in his, he felt the trembling she couldn't control. "I love you, Alex. And it must be obvious that I adore Charley."

"I'm grateful that you feel that way about her, Clif, but..."

"I don't want your gratitude." His voice was rough with emotion. Drawing her closer, he breathed, "I want you."

"But that isn't a reason to marry."

"Isn't it?" He gripped her shoulders and stared down into her wide eyes. "Haven't you noticed? I'm obsessed with you. You've taken over my life, Alexandra." His lips closed over hers with a possessiveness she'd never felt before. At once her blood heated, her lips answered

Bringing her hands to his shoulders, she fought back her fears.

"Clif." She drew a little away, needing time, needing space. "We need to think about this. Marriage is a big step."

"I don't need time. I need you." He touched her cheek, running his knuckles over the smooth skin. "I'm a selfish man, Alex. I've always gotten what I wanted."

His hands pressed her hips to his, then roamed her sides, pausing at the swell of her breasts. She gave a little sigh, and he took the kiss deeper. His thumbs stroked her until she thought she'd go mad.

Alexandra felt herself being swept along on a tide of emotions. He loved her. She loved him. The man she loved as much as life itself wanted to marry her.

"Say the word, and we'll be married now," he said.

"Oh, Clif." She clutched his arm, feeling a wave of panic.

He glanced down at her tenderly. "Unless, of course, you're having doubts."

Doubts? She'd had a million thoughts about the wisdom of loving Clif. But she already loved him desperately. But marriage to him had seemed unattainable. Could they be good for each other? Could it work? She had to take the chance.

She touched a hand to his cheek. Finally, she said, "I'm certain if you are."

He brought her palm to his lips and lovingly kissed each finger. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

THE HOTEL limousine swept along the snow-covered highway. How could this be? Alexandra thought, dazed. A half hour ago she'd been Miss Alexandra Porter. Now, she was Mrs. Clifton Quin Andrews.

"I'm sorry about the ring."

She glanced at the oversize college ring on her left hand.

"There's a vault filled with jewelry in Michigan." He lifted her hand to his lips, and she felt a sudden rush of heat. Would he always have this effect on her? "But I want to buy you something of your own."

Her voice was husky. "I suppose your aunt would object to my having anything of her family's."

"Marion has nothing to say about our lives," he said.

Alexandra lapsed into silence. Marion would be shocked by the news of their marriage, of course. And would probably never accept it. How deeply would that affect Clif?

When the limousine passed the hotel entrance, Alexandra was surprised. "Where are we going?"

"To a private chalet."

She shivered as the driver opened the door. Stepping out, Clif carried her through the doorway of a luxurious chalet; where a fire crackled. He went on to the bedroom, where he set her on her feet beside a massive king-size bed.

She felt suddenly as shy and awkward as a teen.

"I'd better phone Charley and tell her I won't be home until Sunday."

"We can both tell her the good news."

Alexandra's eyes widened. "Clif, I don't think this is something we can tell her on the phone."

"Whatever you think, Alex. While you're phoning Charley, I'll pour the champagne."

On a linen-covered table before the fire, a sumptuous wedding supper had been arranged. In the center, masses of orchids formed an exotic bouquet. Clif filled two glasses with champagne.

"I'll see you Sunday night, then. I love you."

Replacing the receiver, Alexandra turned and accepted one of the crystal glasses. "I forgot about the time difference. Charley didn't even ask why I'm staying on. She was too eager to leave for the ballet."

"Then you can relax, knowing your daughter is having a good time without you."

She nodded, then looked up to meet his gaze. Again she felt the heat. "It's so warm in here. Must be the fire."

As she touched her cheek, his gaze slid to her jacket. Taking the glass from her hand, he set it on the table and slipped the silk covering from her shoulders.

Running his hand lightly along her bare back, he murmured, "It's a good thing I didn't know about this earlier. We never would have made it to the chapel."

"Sorry I kept it from you?"

His hands went to her hair, drawing out the comb that held it up. "You've kept so much from me, Alex," he murmured. He covered her lips with his, and the flame grew. Bringing his hands to her waist, he

found the zipper. A drift of emerald silk whispered to the floor.

His hands moved over her body, leaving her trembling with desire. Passion built until it was almost pain.

"Oh, Clif. I love you so much." Her words were breathless. "Love me. Love me."

She didn't remember being carried to the bed, or how he shed his clothes. She knew only that he lay beside her, flesh to flesh, heartbeat to heartbeat. They came together in a frenzy.

His hands moved over her, exploring, possessive. His lips followed, needing to taste her, to know every part of her intimately. A longing sprang from deep inside her, turning her bones to liquid, as his hands caressed the smooth, satin flesh of her stomach, then cupped the swell of her breasts. A moment later they were replaced by his lips, teasing her already hard nipples. Hearing her moan of pleasure, he kissed her throat.

All her shyness disappeared. Her hands explored his body, moving along his sides, feeling his narrow hips, the flat plane of his stomach. As she brought her hand lower, he gave a desperate moan and savaged her mouth.

She thrilled to the power she had over him. Bolder now, she let her fingertips begin a slow journey of discovery.

His touch became wild, demanding. His mouth found hers, and he prolonged the kiss until all she could taste was him—dark, musky, completely masculine.

Their bodies joined, and they tumbled into a world of sensation. He called her name and whispered words that she could no longer hear. Clinging tightly, she moved with him, her hands clasped about his neck. A fine sheen covered their bodies. Their passion built until they felt themselves exploding in a shower of stars.

He was hers. Even while she exalted in the thought, a new one intruded. She was his. Her heart hammered in her chest. She sighed unsteadily. "Clif."

His mouth covered hers, stifling her cry, and the pleasure built once more. Passion shuddered through her, wave after wave of it, completely overpowering her.

Afterward, they lay locked together, their breathing shallow, lips touching, as the fire burned down to embers, and the wedding dinner grew cold. And two hearts slowly settled into a steady rhythm, as husband and wife continued to hold each other in an intimate embrace.

"I WISH we didn't have to leave."

Alexandra settled herself in the airport limousine.

"If there weren't so many problems at the company right now, we'd stay on." Clif brushed his lips tenderly over hers. "But I promise you we'll have a real honeymoon soon."

"It couldn't get any better than this."

Alexandra had never dreamed love could be so fulfilling. Never again would she look back, only forward toward a bright, happy future.

They had taken a horse-drawn sleigh into town, to shop for presents for Milly and Charley. Her hand moved to the small diamond heart at her throat. Clif had taken her into a jeweler's and surprised her with it.

"After our managerial meeting I'd like to take you and Charley away for the holidays."

"Sounds heavenly."

He glanced down at her head, snuggled against him. Touching a tiny frown line between her eyes, he whispered, "Something's on your mind, Alex. What is it?"

The question startled her. "The managerial meeting."

"What about it?"

"There are some... unpleasant things I'll have to deal with before that meeting." She looked up at him. "I haven't wanted to talk about my problems at work. I was hoping to tell you when I got to the bottom of everything."

He went very still. "Why don't you try telling me now."

She took a deep breath. "Someone in Division Two is leaking our test results to the press, often before they're even revealed to the rest of the company. Most of the evidence points to someone very close to me." Her voice lowered. "For a few weak moments, I actually suspected my assistant, Mike."

"What changed your mind?"

"Call it intuition. I trust Mike completely."

His tone was sharper than he'd intended. "If it isn't Mike Miller who could it be?"

"Someone who, for reasons unknown to me, wants to hurt the company."

Clif's voice was commanding. "A name, Alex."

She looked up and met his cool eyes. "Bill Campbell."

He stiffened. One of his aunt's favorite employees. "Bill's been with the company for years. Why should he suddenly turn against us?"

She licked her lips. "I don't have all the proof yet." She told him about the locked file and the key on the floor and her belief that papers in her briefcase had been rearranged. "Before I left, I went through my private file. The pages were out of order. I think if I were to go to his home I'd find photocopies of all the test results over the past few months."

Beside her, Clif had grown very quiet. Bill Campbell had been in line for Alexandra's job. She might be unaware of that fact, but Bill had known. And someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make her look guilty. Clif remembered the investigator's two Gs. Greed and grudge. It all fit.

IT WAS nearly midnight when Clif drove her to her door.

"I wish you could stay the night at my house," he muttered.

"It's too late to wake Charley." She held the front door, then led him to the living room, where Milly was asleep on the sofa. "I won't wake her either. She may as well spend the night right there."

Clif deposited her suitcases, then walked back to the door. Alexandra raised her face for a last kiss.

"It's only for a night," she said. "Tomorrow, over dinner, we can break the news to Charley together."

He gathered her close and covered her mouth with his.

"One night," he growled, "and then I don't ever want us to be apart again."

She felt the urgency in his kiss, and her body responded.

"Take the morning off, Alex," he whispered. "You need time to unpack. That's an order from the company president."

A slow smile spread across her face, "Good night, Mr. Andrews," she murmured.

"Good night, Mrs. Andrews."

"WHERE'VE you been? You missed all the excitement." Mike Miller came running as Alexandra entered the office.

"What excitement?" It was noon. Clif hadn't said anything about taking the afternoon off.

"Bill Campbell has been accused of leaking test results to competitors and to the media."

Alexandra slumped down in her chair. "When?"

Mike shrugged. "I'm not sure. There are a dozen different rumors. Apparently he was visited late last night by a private investigator. When he didn't show up this morning, his secretary called and was told he wouldn't be returning to the company."

"You don't know any more than that, Mike?"

"As soon as I hear anything, you'll be the first to know."

MARTHA looked up from her desk as Clif's aunt strode past. "I'm sorry, Mr. Andrews isn't in his office just now."

"I know. I'll wait." Without another word, Marion closed the door behind her. She had left the board meeting while Clif was still accepting accolades. As always, he had come out of this looking like a white knight.

Taking the seat behind his desk, she spread her hands on the smooth top and glanced around the luxurious office.

It should have been hers, she thought angrily. Her father had never bothered to notice that she was better qualified to run the company than her younger brother.

The phone rang, shattering her thoughts. Picking it up, she said absently, "Yes?"

A female voice asked, "Mr. Clif Andrews's office?"

"Yes. Mr. Andrews is out."

Then she heard, "This is the Little Chapel of the Sierras. We have a tape available of the ceremony between Mr. Andrews and his bride, plus several lovely photographs. Would Mr. and Mrs. Andrews like them mailed?"

Marion's mouth dropped open in shock. Her voice came out in a squeak. "The bride's name is ...?"

"Alexandra Porter Andrews."

Her eyes narrowed. Of course. The shy Miss Porter.

"Do you think they'll want to buy the tape and pictures?"

Marion's voice was steadier now. "I seriously doubt it. They've probably had time to regret their foolish action. Just file those . . . mementos in the nearest wastebasket."

ALEXANDRA set the steaks in a marinade as Milly had shown her. She insisted on making this dinner by herself. She expected Clif by seven. They would tell Charley about their marriage, then after dinner the three of them would go over to Milly's house and share their happy news.

Charley was at Milly's right now, practicing her ballet. It was to be their last time together. The three of them had already had a tea party to celebrate Milly's departure for Chicago in the morning. This time she was leaving for good.

When the doorbell rang, Alexandra hurried to the front door.

At the unexpected sight of Clif's aunt, she was speechless.

"May I come in?"

She stood aside. Marion surveyed the room with a critical glance, then chose a straight high-backed chair.

"It must be a relief for you to know that Bill Campbell has been accused of leaking test results," Marion said.

"A relief?" Alexandra sat on the edge of the sofa. "I'm glad the leaks have been stopped. But I'm sorry for him. I'd hoped I was wrong about him."

Marion gave her a bright smile and leaned forward conspiratorially. "Well, I know it's a relief for my

nephew. He was so afraid you were the guilty party."

"Me?"

Seeing Alexandra's color fade suddenly, Marion said sweetly, "You can imagine how it would look if Clif Andrews's 'good friend' should turn out to be using him. The board would demand his resignation." She lowered her voice. "I'm sure Clif considered confronting you with his suspicions. But what if you were to deny everything?" She shrugged. "He needed to get close enough to you to have your confidence."

Alexandra felt disgust rising like bile in her throat. *Close enough*. Was being married close enough? "And what if I'd turned out to be the guilty party?"

"With a man like Clif, one never knows. I told him he couldn't take on the problems of the entire world. But you know Clif." Marion gave a little sigh. "He's always taking in strays. He probably worried that you'd lose your job. It wouldn't be easy to find a position with another auto company in this town with so many shadows on your reputation."

Alexandra's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

Marion hoped she looked properly embarrassed. "I meant your child, of course. I knew your grandmother. And I remember how your poor mother and father fled town."

She stood. "Now that your job is secure, Miss Porter, you won't have to continue your 'intimate' friendship with my nephew. Unless, of course, you've decided that you'd like to get your hands on the Andrews fortune, as well. But I warn

you, I won't stand by and watch my family dragged to the level of yours. Clif thinks he's done something noble by rescuing you before your reputation could be further damaged. But you and I know better, don't we?"

Seeing the stricken look on Alexandra's face, she swept by. "Don't bother seeing me to the door. I can find my way out."

Alexandra's mind reeled. Clif had suspected her of those leaks. And he'd needed to get close enough to know the truth. Was Marion right? Had he pitied her? Obviously, the board couldn't demand the resignation of his wife. When the pressure was off, a marriage could easily be annulled. She felt faint. It was all happening again. The joy, the love, the euphoria had turned into pain, betrayal.

Long after the door closed behind her, Alexandra continued to sit numbly on the sofa.

"MILLY, would you give this letter to Clif, please?"

The housekeeper took one look at Alexandra's pale features and caught her hand. "My Lord. You look like death. Are you coming down with something?"

"Milly, please don't ask any questions. I'm taking Charley away for the holidays."

"Away? I thought you were making dinner for Clif Andrews."

"Everything's changed." Wiping a tear, Alexandra said, "I have some tough decisions to make. Charley and I need to be alone."

"I'll help you pack."

"It's done. The bags are in the car."

THEY DROVE for hours into the Northern Michigan night. Following a faded map, Alexandra found the snug cottage nestled among tall pines.

Charley had fallen asleep finally. The steady rhythm of the wheels had lulled her, despite her questions, tears and unhappiness. She had argued that the only thing she wanted for Christmas was to be at home with Clif and their tree. Her words only added to her mother's heart-break.

Alexandra trudged through knee-high snow to the front door. Taking the key from its ancient case, she turned it in the lock, relieved to feel the door open. Switching on the lights, she stared around at the ghostly furniture, draped in white covers.

Upstairs she uncovered the bed in the smaller bedroom. Memories came flooding back, memories of wonderful summers spent with her grandmother here at the lake.

Hurrying downstairs, she carried her sleeping daughter inside and put her to bed. For the next hour, she uncovered furniture, shaking the dusty covers outside. When at last she had a fire blazing, she made herself a cup of tea and gave in to overwhelming feelings of sadness.

Listless, she climbed the stairs to her grandmother's big bedroom. Sitting down on the four-poster bed, she smiled.

Slowly undressing, she folded her clothes and opened a dresser drawer.

Inside she found a faded photograph album. After pulling on a warm robe, she went downstairs and began leafing through the yellowed pages. Between the last one and the album cover, Alexandra found an envelope with her name on it. Slowly she withdrew a sheet of lavender-tinted stationery. On it she read her grandmother's last letter to her, obviously written shortly before her death:

Dearest Alexandra,

I know that right now, your future must appear bleak. I want you to cling to the belief that somewhere in this world you will find a man who will love you and your baby for yourselves—a man who will cherish you, who will care nothing for your name or your family history, but who will love you in a special way. With such a man you can share laughter, tears, love. With such a man you will know life's greatest treasure. Settle for nothing less.

All evening she had held the tears at bay. Now they streamed down her cheeks. She cried for the child she had been and the child upstairs. She cried for the man who had seemed to be all the things Gram had wished for her, but who had used her for his own selfish purposes. She cried for all her dreams, which would never come true now.

CLIF DROVE like a madman. The letter Alexandra had written him lay crumpled on the seat beside him.

She'd written of his aunt's visit, of Marion's assertion that he'd married her in the hopes that she would let down her guard and tell him everything she knew about the security problem. She'd mentioned his weakness for strays. And finally she had promised to sign any annulment papers his lawyers drew up.

Milly couldn't tell Clif where Alexandra and Charley had gone. But he'd known. He'd seen the light in Alexandra's eyes when she spoke of her grandmother's cottage.

The snow had been falling since he'd left home. Straining in the darkness, he saw the lights. Swinging off the highway, he pulled up behind her snow-covered car.

ALEXANDRA'S head jerked up at the knock on the door. There was no one around for miles, and no one knew she was here.

Going to the door, she pulled the dusty curtain aside and stared out. Then she opened the door but barred his entrance.

"How did you find me?"

He heard the anger in her voice but ignored it, clinging to the look that had come into her eyes in that first unguarded instant. There was hope, he told himself, if he was careful.

"I remembered how you loved your grandmother's cottage."

A gust of wind made her shiver, as he closed the heavy wooden door. When he turned, she fled across the room, standing in front of the fire.

"I read your letter, Alex."

"And you brought the annulment papers?"

His eyes narrowed. "I want to talk about what my aunt said."

"You thought I was the one leaking those test results." Her words were spoken softly.

"You were a suspect, along with everyone in Division Two. But I never believed you were guilty."

"But I was a suspect even before you began seeing me. That was why you came to my house that first time. To see if you could trick me."

"Don't, Alex. That isn't true. I came to see you because I was intrigued. And then I couldn't stop seeing you."

"You wanted to find out all I knew. When you couldn't get me into your bed any other way, you chose marriage."

"You can't believe that."

"Liar! You tricked me. I trusted you, Clif. And you betrayed me."

Her eyes were dry, her spine straight. He knew that look. This was the way he loved her. This was what he admired about the proper Alexandra Porter.

"I used every trick in the book to get you to marry me quickly, before you could think of a good reason not to," he said in a low voice. He reached out a hand to her hair.

Heat raced along her spine. She felt her knees grow weak.

"I won't be made to feel guilty about that. I love you, Alex. And if it takes me the rest of my life, I'll prove to you how much."

"And your aunt? How do you explain the things she said?"

"I have no control over Marion."

"But she knew all about me. Are you saying you two never discussed my past?"

"We never discussed your past or your future," he said. "I make it my business to live my life independent of what others think. I'd advise you to do the same. Look at me, damn it. I could never betray you. I'd rather cut out my heart."

Alexandra examined the pain in his eyes. How had she ever thought him cold, unfeeling? He was the only man who had ever touched her heart in this special way. When she was this close, she knew instinctively that she could trust him. Because, her heart whispered, Clif Andrews was an honorable man. A man worthy of trust. She stared at him as if her vision had cleared suddenly.

"I think it's time I stopped living in the past," she said.

His heart seemed to stop beating.

Slowly, gradually, humor flashed in her eyes. "So I take it an annulment is out of the question."

His eyes narrowed. "Absolutely."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and brought her lips to within inches of his. "Then I believe you owe me another honeymoon. The first was too short. And you did say something about taking Charley and me away for the holidays."

His gaze focused on her mouth, and he pulled her close. When he found her lips, they both felt the heat blaze.

"There's a big old bed that used to be my grandmother's," she whispered against his lips. As the kiss deepened, she felt her pulse race. It would always be like this when he

touched her. "I suggest we start that honeymoon tonight. And first thing in the morning, after we share our secret with Charley, you two can go out in the woods and cut another tree."

He ran his hand lightly along her back. "I like the way you think, lady," he muttered against her lips.

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a small silver box. It contained a simple gold band and he placed it on her finger. "I can't have my wife going around in an oversize class

ring." He kissed her finger, as if to seal the bargain. "There's no turning back, Alex. I'm going to love you forever."

"Forever." She sighed. "I'm not sure that's going to be long enough."

"Then let's get started." He lifted her in his arms and climbed the stairs.

"Welcome home, Mr. Andrews."

There was a light in his eyes she'd never seen before. It said more than any words. "I love you, Mrs. Andrews."





REGAN FOREST

Star-crossed



Diana Cotrelle and Brent Kerry are star-crossed lovers, indeed, sharing a passion for each other and for the world's wild places. But can their own very different worlds and lives ever be reconciled?

"Diana, if you go out there, you'll regret it!" The attractive South African raised pleading eyes as she set her teacup on its saucer. "The bush is just too dangerous!"

"Oh, come on!" Her pretty, dark-haired companion smiled. "A camera safari isn't dangerous."

"No? The lions? Rhinos? Snakes? Have you got antimalaria pills?"

"Sure. I started taking them last week." Diana Cotrelle smiled across the breakfast table. "Why don't you come with me, Marcielle?"

"Not on your life!"

Sighing, Diana looked out through the French doors onto a garden bright with winter flowers and a shimmering swimming pool. This prestigious suburb of Johannesburg and Marcielle's luxurious home hardly fitted her picture of Africa. Somewhere beyond all this was the real Africa, the one Diana longed to see. She sipped her tea slowly. "I don't understand your attitude, Marcielle. You grew up in Africa."

"Well, I had no choice in that, did I? But this is my Africa—this house, my garden. Our wonderful cities. The beaches. Not the bush, for heaven's sake!"

Diana grinned. "You used to be punky enough to tackle the great outdoors. Remember when we climbed Pikes Peak with the Powell brothers?"

Marcielle sighed dreamily, as she often did when they talked of their days together at the University of Colorado. "Anyway, old mate, why has it taken you so long to visit me? Don't all college professors have summers free?"

"Since my grandmother and I started our antique shop, summers have been really busy. And I'm not a professor. I'm an instructor."

"Oh, what's the difference? A biologist is a biologist. I suppose doing two jobs keeps you out of mischief. Have you had any mischief since your divorce?"

"No. No mischief."

"That isn't you, is it?" Marcielle poured more tea.

"I'm pretty content with my life." And it was true.

"I've worried about you since Mike left. The rogue. But six-years of being single is enough."

Diana pulled her gray satin robe tighter over her chest, feeling the cold of early morning in the unheated house.

"Well." She shrugged. "No need for me to start worrying until tomorrow when I find myself in the middle of Botswana with no way to get home. Today let's go into the city. I want to buy a hat."

EARLY THE next morning Diana rode the train into Johannesburg. At the station she found a taxi to take her to

the designated area where the safari was to assemble. She hadn't an inkling of what to expect this cold July winter morning in this southern land.

She wore jeans, a bright red sweater and a navy parka open in front. The day was already too warm for the parka. Behind her she heard the taxi circle out of the lot, leaving her with a feeling of being adrift at sea.

Two young men in khaki clothes were greeting those who gathered beside two sturdy four-wheel-drive vans and loading in their luggage. Now a heavily packed truck with a tarpaulin over its loaded bed and the name Gemsbok Safaris on its doors, roared into the lot. A tall, sandy-haired man, probably in his late thirties, stepped out of the driver's seat. Clipboard in hand, he surveyed the waiting group. Diana stopped, slightly stunned, to focus her attention on one of the most ruggedly handsome men she'd ever seen. He was deeply tanned and wore a safari suit on a wide-shouldered, husky body. His face was intriguing: deep-set eyes, a straight, fine nose, a smile so enchanting she could just stand numbly and stare behind her dark glasses.

Self-assured, laughing easily, he seemed absorbed in greeting his clients until, unexpectedly, he looked up from the group and saw Diana there, standing alone. Their eyes met over the hustle of activity, for unmeasured seconds he stared at her, then suddenly gave her an electrifying, oddly exclusive smile. She smiled back, and the space between

them dissolved as she walked toward him.

"You must be Diana Cotrelle, since everyone else is accounted for," the man said in the familiar South African accent, smiling down with light gray eyes from his six-foot height.

She nodded.

"I'm Brent Kerry, your guide—along with these other confident-looking blokes. This is Johannesburg . . . and Rennie there with the zebra band on his hat. Find yourself a seat, Diana, and we'll roll out."

They were standing near the open door of the smaller van. Inside, an attractive woman began rearranging her belongings. "There's room here next to me." She juggled aside a canvas bag, a camera case and an open spiral notebook.

"Thanks," Diana said as she climbed in.

Her seatmate said, "I'm Jill Marsden. From London. I'm a feature writer for the *Commonwealth Carrier*."

Diana introduced herself, observing with a smile, "Looks like you're already at work on a safari story."

"That I am. Already taking inventory of our group, and I'm quite sure you're the only American aboard."

Smiling, Diana made a second attempt to arrange her belongings so they fitted comfortably into what little area hadn't been converted to Jill Marsden's "office."

When the vans pulled out into city traffic, Diana lowered her sunglasses and began to relax. Heading out of Johannesburg, they entered

the countryside of the Transvaal's central plateau along the Witwatersrand.

At the sleepy town of Mafeking near the Botswana border their driver, Rennie, parked on the main street behind the two other safari vehicles and pointed out a small café that was open for lunch.

The place reminded Diana of an American truck stop. She was sitting beside Jill Marsden, eating a chicken sandwich and potato chips.

"I wonder," Jill said, sipping an orange drink, "if Brent intends to drive the lorry all the time, or if the drivers will switch. I'd like to plan accordingly."

"Plan what?" Diana asked.

The redhead grinned. "Our handsome safari guide is a bonus I hadn't figured on. I was watching the faces of the women when he swung out of that lorry this morning. This trip is going to be quite fun, Diana!" Suddenly her eyes narrowed. "You're married, I hope."

"Nope."

"Oh, damn! That presents me with a challenge, doesn't it? But I want Brent Kerry, and I always get what I want. Except for you, I didn't see anyone here who will pose any real competition."

Diana interrupted. "Jill, what are you talking about? You're forgetting that we're all here to see wild animals. You sound like a fugitive from too many luxury cruises, where the object of the hunt is the opposite sex."

"The object of everything is the opposite sex! Really, Diana, do you think I intend to build a feature story

around what lions eat for breakfast?"

Jill Marsden probably did know how to get what she wanted, Diana thought. She was beautiful, slender and tall, towering over Diana's five-foot-five frame. Her white shorts showed off long, shapely legs; her T-shirt hugged bouncy, ample breasts. For all her physical beauty, though, Jill was not, at the moment, very likable. The last person Diana expected to meet on safari was someone who didn't care a whit about the wilderness except for its effect on human behavior.

In late afternoon the lead truck pulled off the dirt road on a lonely, windblown Botswana plain. The vans followed, and moments later their engines ceased. This forlorn spot was to be their first campsite.

There was work for everybody. Food was unpacked, dishes and utensils set out on a folding table near the fire site. Within the hour cots were set up under open sky, the fire was blazing and the evening meal of lamb chops, steamed rice and fresh salad was being prepared.

Diana had volunteered to slice cucumbers and tomatoes for the salad. That done, she excused herself and set out alone into the brush. It was going to take some getting used to, this having no bathroom and only a few scraggly trees for privacy.

Heading back, with the last rays of bright sunshine slanting down from the west, she could feel the warmth of the day lifting.

A figure was approaching from the direction of camp. She recognized Katherine van Zyl, a young

Afrikaner she had met an hour before during their search for firewood.

Now Katherine gave a small wave. Diana started to raise her arm, when she felt the drift of premonition move over her. Stopping abruptly, she turned toward a small movement in the shadows.

The cobra had seen her first. Less than five feet away the large snake sat perfectly still, its hooded neck and head raised high, its curled, glossy body protected by soft, leafy shadows.

Diana's breath left her; her voice locked tightly in her throat. She was unable to move as the silent bush resounded with a loud hissing sound. The same instant her vision clouded, and she reeled backward, feeling nothing but the paralyzing fear.

Even at the crest of fright, she was aware that the other woman was running toward her. Desperately Diana fought to release her voice. When her shaking hands pulled off her sunglasses, her sight cleared. The cobra had spit at her eyes!

"Katherine!" she was able to shriek finally. "A cobra! Go back!"

But the snake had gone. Weakly Diana stared at her glasses, then dropped them on the sand. The jet of venom had made a direct hit.

Someone's screams—Katherine's, she assumed—pierced the late-afternoon calm, and people were racing toward them. Johannes, in the lead, grabbed Diana's teetering body. Brent, breathing hard, cupped her ashen face in his hands. Tears of terror streamed down her cheeks; she

went completely limp in Johannes's arms.

While Johannes held her, Brent was dabbing at her tears. "Diana? Were you bitten?"

His face was a blur before her. She shook her head numbly.

"Your eyes? Did it spray your eyes?"

"My glasses . . ." she muttered.

"Sunglasses!" Rennie exploded, picking them up.

"Thank God!" Brent breathed in a half whisper. "Did *any* get in your eyes, Diana?"

"I don't know."

He exhaled a great breath. "You'd know."

She raised her hand to wipe at her tears, but he grabbed her wrist. "No! Don't touch your eyes! There may be venom on your hands. I can see there's some on your jersey."

Strong, gentle arms sheltered her as they led her back to camp.

Brent Kerry sat the trembling woman down near the fire and knelt beside her while Rennie brought water and soap. "You must wash wherever you may have been exposed to the spray." Brent took out a pocket knife. "I'll have to cut off your jersey. We don't dare lift it over your head."

She nodded numbly and watched as he split her good red sweater and pulled it away. Brent draped a large towel over her shoulders. Then he proceeded to soap her face, her arms and hands, as though she were a child.

"I'm examining your skin for any small cuts the venom could get into, but I don't see any."

Katherine van Zyl came over and took Diana's hand. "What would have happened if the spit had hit her eyes?"

"I'd have been temporarily blinded," Diana said.

"True enough." Johannes grinned. "Not to mention the pain. But we carry polyvalent serum for the eyes."

Katherine stared at him. "And if it had bitten her?"

"We won't even talk about that," Brent answered. "We have anti-venom serum and tourniquets should it ever happen. But it never has, in my years of safaris. These cobras would far rather spit than bite."

When Diana tried to rise, her knees gave way. Brent caught her and held her for several long seconds. "Why don't you lie down for a little while? Rest a bit. Which cot is yours?"

She pointed it out, and he sat her down. At that moment the unexpected flash of a camera made him turn his head. Diana couldn't miss the storm of white-hot anger in his eyes. A short distance away, Jill Marsden was standing, camera in hand, smiling. Brent stared at Jill for a moment, then looked away and rose.

"I'll get back to my cooking," Brent smiled down at Diana. "I'm sure you don't feel like eating, but I'll save you something for later."

An hour later, rested and wanting the warmth of fire and companions, Diana joined the group. Their meal over and the washing-up done, they sat on little stools or on the ground, visiting politely, still strangers and

still curiously evaluating one another.

Gradually, as the night deepened, the circle of camaraderie grew smaller. People wandered back toward their cots and sleeping bags. Flashlights could be seen darting around the outer edges of the camp area.

Jill Marsden appeared with her camera. "Look this way, everyone!" she commanded. "Come on, Brent, love, give us a captivating smile!"

He turned deliberately away.

"Now look what you've done! My shot is spoiled because you looked away!"

"Why not save your film for the animals?" Brent's tone was cool.

"Aw, why? Don't you like to be photographed?"

"No," he answered tersely. "I don't."

Shrugging dramatically, Jill sat down by the fire. "Diana, have your nerves settled down yet?"

"No, not really."

Brent rose. "I have something in the lorry that might help, Diana."

Feeling the eyes of others on her, she followed Brent to the truck.

He pulled out a bottle. "Brandy. Best remedy I know for the aftereffects of a bad scare."

She took the glass he offered and sipped gratefully, then looked up at him.

"Must I drink alone?"

"Certainly not," he answered, gently taking her glass and drinking from it.

She leaned against the truck. "Brent, I feel foolish. I acted like an

idiot over the snake. That horrible sound..."

Brent's hand rested on her shoulder as he took another sip of brandy. "When I was a boy I would often listen to the Africans tell stories about Muhlambela, a giant man-killing snake who could bleat like a bok and who traveled about in tree-tops." He grinned. "I believed every word and had nightmares for years."

"Tell me..." she began, but was interrupted by a flash exploding in their eyes. She jumped, startled.

Brent straightened and muttered something as Jill Marsden's voice floated out of the darkness. "Aha, Mr. Kerry, caught you! That doesn't look like snake-fright medicine to me!"

His answer, though soft, was deadly serious. "Miss Marsden, I asked you not to take my picture. It's a small favor, but I have the right to ask it."

Jill smiled then, very sweetly. "My apologies. I promise to hand over the negatives to you. After all, I may be the next damsel in distress who needs your fright tonic."

He said, "It's not a private party. Join us."

"I was hoping you'd ask."

"It's excellent brandy," Diana said. "South African?"

"Our best." Brent smiled, producing a second glass.

It seemed odd to Diana that he had found a glass for Jill while he himself continued to sip from hers, but if Jill noticed this, she didn't let on.

DIANA SAT in the van beside Johannes on their third day out. They were in the heart of the great Kalahari, heading for a Bushman settlement. Grass huts scattered over the desert landscape were evidence they were growing closer to their destination.

Yesterday morning Jill had congratulated Diana on her luck with the cobra scare, admitting that the incident had wrapped up Brent's attention for hours and so deserved a salute to time-honored wizardry. Then she had announced a bolder offensive, as she climbed, uninvited, into the truck seat next to Brent. Obviously Jill enjoyed the game and believed Diana was willing to play, which she wasn't. Yet she could not watch it with total indifference, either.

Brent seemed perfectly happy with Jill's company, Diana had observed, and maybe it was just as well. A strong voice within kept reminding her that a safari was the epitome of temporary, far-from-home adventures. Yet another part of her—the part that warmed and trembled whenever Brent Kerry was near—wanted to know him, to be close to him, to touch him.

A bumpy hour later the vehicles halted near the entrance of a tiny Bushman village. That night, an eeriness hung in the gray-black air above their campfire. The great, sprawling desert was silent and cold. The travelers talked in quieter tones than usual, knowing, without seeing, that they were not alone out here.

Across the fire, Jill had plopped down beside Brent. Diana was chatting with Tommy Clarke, an Englishman, and Katherine about touring Swaziland, when she spotted a strange face in the crowd. A Bushman had come out of the night without a sound, like a ghost. Soon there was another. And a third. They said nothing, only sat there, spirits of the haunting, ancient world.

Flames rose into the dark some distance away. A Bushman campfire. Near it, like a breath of magic, still another fire arose.

At one of the fires the women and children sat chanting lowly. Men gathered around the second campfire. Shirtless, with seed and gourd rattles tied to their ankles, they began to circle the fire in rhythm with the women's chants.

Hypnotized by the scene, Diana moved into the shadows to watch. Although she had seen Jill clinging to Brent's arm when they walked to the Bushman fires, Diana became so lost in the enchantment of the sights and sounds before her she forgot everything else.

How long she stood, entranced, Diana didn't know. She was only vaguely aware that her companions had by now wandered back to their own fire for warmth. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, but she could not draw herself away.

She felt a presence at her side, the brush of a shoulder against hers. It was Brent. "The dancing is not of the highest spirits tonight. It varies with the changing of the moon."

"It's as if we'd stepped back in time ten thousand years." Diana's voice was soft with awe.

"In a way we have. I've been watching you. You were wondering what the mothers with their babies were thinking about and what the men were feeling in the midst of their dance."

Diana glanced up at him. "How did you know that?"

"My sight is keen in darkness. I can read your eyes."

Brent moved closer until his arm was touching hers. "Do you know you and I are the only ones still out here? Our friends are all back at the fire. They'll have got out the liquor by now and dismissed the dancing in favor of exchanging stories about themselves."

"You must learn a great deal about people in this job."

"I learn more than I want to know." He paused and looked down at her. "What do you do in America, Diana?"

"I teach college biology."

"I'll be damned. I've been doing graduate work in biology myself."

"You have? In what field?"

"Ecology." Brent asked, "Are you on holiday?"

"I've been spending my summer vacation in Johannesburg, visiting a friend."

He smiled warily. "You don't wear a wedding ring."

"I'm not married. Not anymore."

She thought he started to say something and then changed his mind. She asked, "Are you?"

"No." His arm went around her shoulders. "Let's go back to the fire and warm ourselves a bit."

Tommy Clarke was telling jokes one after another. Laughter resounded from the circle and the liquor, as Brent had predicted, was flowing. Diana sat on a log and stretched her numb toes toward the warmth. In moments Brent was settling himself down beside her, handing her a glass of brandy and sipping from his own. The gesture, she knew, would not go unnoticed. Jill gave her a look she could not interpret, then shifted closer to Tommy Clarke, giving him her rapt attention.

Diana gazed up at the cold, starry sky and mused, "There must be more stars in the southern hemisphere than in the northern."

"I'm told that's true," Brent affirmed. He pointed out four extremely bright stars. "That's the Southern Cross. The Bushmen say it's a giraffe in the sky, but I could never see it even though they've tried to show me. You have to count eighteen stars in the constellation to see it, so they told me."

Diana hugged her knees, losing count. "Johannes told me you own Gemsbok Safaris."

"I started the company five years ago."

"What did you do before that?"

In the glow of the firelight she saw a dark shadow cloud his eyes. He looked away.

Realizing she had overstepped some invisible boundary, Diana regretted her own curiosity.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"You're not prying," he said. "It's just . . . there are things I prefer to forget."

The sudden, subtle change in Brent's voice told her she had hit a nerve with her innocent question.

There was something in him, Diana perceived, that echoed sorrow.

Listening to the ancient chants, she felt restless, misplaced. She set her empty glass on the log. "I think I'll go back and watch the dancing. I'll never have this chance again."

Brent rose and walked back to the Bushman fires with her, staying at her side as the chanting rose and softened.

"Brent!" she whispered suddenly, gazing upward. "I can see it now! The giraffe. I glanced up and there it was. He's leaning . . . this way . . . do you see?"

"No, I've never . . ." Brent paused. "Well, wait a minute! If he's facing that way, he's running . . ."

"Yes, he's running! You do see it?"

"I'll be damned! Right! I sure do." His arm went around her shoulders. "I've been looking at the Southern Cross all my life. I've never seen the giraffe before. Now he'll always be up there. And I'll remember you each time I see it."

*

THE FIRST night on the reserve at Chobe they camped on a rise above the river and watched small groups of elephants come down in the evening to drink. After her first glimpse of the gray giants, Diana's heart began to pound with excitement. They were the greatest danger in the bush,

Brent said, and yet she felt drawn to them. The following day, driving under drizzly skies, they came upon a herd of fifty or more.

They stopped at camping facilities in the town of Victoria Falls that boasted all the comforts of home, settled in quickly and set out to see the sights. Diana joined a group of her fellow travelers for a cruise on the Zambezi River and a visit to the spectacular falls.

When Diana, Jill, Katherine and Tommy returned together, their three safari guides were sitting on the veranda, drinking from tall glasses. "We were waiting for you," Brent said. "We're going to dinner at the hotel. Everyone else has gone on ahead, but take your time. There's no reason to hurry."

Dinner was served by candlelight in elaborate gardens on the hotel grounds. Jill had rushed in to sit beside Brent, and Diana sat across the table, facing them. Diana, along with everyone else, was aware of Jill's flirting, of her hand on Brent's knee. Several times during their meal she glanced up to see Brent looking not at Jill, but at her, in a private way, as though there was something on his mind.

When the first round of after-dinner cocktails was finished, he stood, extended his hand and said, "There's something I want to show you, Diana."

"Aha! Where are the two of you off to this time?" Tommy chided.

"Don't worry," Brent smiled.

Jill started to rise, then reluctantly sat back, glaring at Diana.

When they left the hotel grounds, Diana asked, "Where are we going?"

"To see the falls by moonlight."

It was not a long walk to the park entrance, where a uniformed guard smiled and waved them through the gate.

They stood on the mile-wide rim, looking across a giant chasm to the opposite edge, where the slow-moving Zambezi plunged down four hundred feet into a frenzied, foaming stream. The water formed rainbows in its mist—patterns bright and shimmering in the radiance of the round white moon. Above them sparkled their ever-present secret—the elusive giraffe in the sky.

Brent stood quietly with his arm around her, then asked softly, "What do you think of it?"

"They've never made words to express the beauty of this. It's more than beautiful. It's... alive!"

"I didn't want you to miss seeing the falls at night." His arm tightened. "What I mean is, I didn't want us to miss it."

She looked over at him, at his face in moonlight, and was again surprised at the masculine perfection of him. Now she marveled at the tender sentiment of his words, too.

But their paths were crossing only temporarily; it could not be otherwise. They lived on opposite sides of the ocean. He knew she would return to her own world with this memory, and he was making it special for her.

Brent was saying, "I'm glad it's a clear night so you can see the colors.

I'd like us to take a plane ride over the falls, but there won't be time."

"No. The days pass so quickly."

"Too quickly." He circled his arms around her, holding her. Then he was kissing her and all awareness of time dissolved. She leaned into his strong body, hugging him tightly, as though she could never get close enough. Tears came to her eyes, but she couldn't understand why. She was only aware that the emotion was stronger than anything she had ever felt.

Brent gently lifted her face toward him. "What is it, Diana?"

"I think it's just...this place, this moment..."

His lips brushed her wet cheek, her closed eyes. Then his mouth was over hers, open and hungry for the taste of her. The town below and their companions seemed far away.

Her knees weakened from the power of his kiss; she trembled. Her hands brushed through the softness of his hair, slowly at first, then frantically as his kiss deepened. She could feel the hardness of his passion as he held her to his body and she savored the feel of his arousal. Never had she ached for love the way she did with this man.

His breath came hard and fast in rhythm with her own as he whispered, "What do you do to me?"

Her heart pounded too wildly. What would happen, she wondered dizzily, if this were a private place? Even now there were two other couples out on the rim. The darkness was their only privacy.

His hands, which had been moving hotly along her spine, suddenly

stopped. Setting her away from him, he murmured, "I have to get control of myself. This is wrong of me."

She was unsure what he meant. Wrong to arouse her? Wrong to give the others something to gossip about? Or wrong because he was betraying some other woman? Check one, she thought as he drew farther away. Or check all of the above.

He gazed down into her eyes. That look was there again, that sadness. "Your beauty blinds me," he whispered.

He kissed her forehead and took her hand to lead her back through the rain forest. Once they were on the street, she turned to him. "The bush seems so much a part of you. Did you grow up out here?"

He shook his head. "My family lived in Pretoria, but they had a second home near Durban where I spent many winters as a child. From the first time I visited Kruger Park, I never stopped begging to go back. I read everything about the animals. I all but worshiped the game rangers and wanted to become one."

"And so you did?"

"No. My family packed me off to a private prep school in England. I went to Cambridge after that. I was away from home for seven years."

"You studied biology at Cambridge?"

"Political science. The biology came later."

"After what?"

He paused, then answered lightly, "After trying a life that didn't suit me. They say that once in the blood, Africa stays in a man for his lifetime."

She would not press him; the part of his life he protected was none of her business.

THE LAST night of the safari they were camped somewhere south of Francistown. It was bitterly cold and Diana lay on her cot, looking up at the elusive diamond giraffe—bright stars beyond reach. There was no denying she was in love with Brent Kerry—stupidly in love with a man whose life was crossing hers only for a moment! In less than three weeks she would be home again.

She shivered, wishing she could sleep. Tomorrow night she would be under the satin comforters of Marcielle's guest bed and Brent would be...where? Very likely there was someone waiting to welcome him home.

As the night wore on, the cold deepened. The fire was dying down. Turning, she picked out Brent's cot near the fire. She rose and made her way carefully through the sleeping bodies. Brent stirred and turned, but he was not awake. His forehead was shiny with perspiration and he was moaning softly, tossing fitfully, until he cried out with a sound like terror.

Diana knelt beside him and lightly touched his forehead.

He shot up into a sitting position, his eyes wide open. She reached out. "Brent, I didn't mean to startle you."

He seemed disoriented. "Diana?"

She sat on the edge of his cot. "You were dreaming. You cried out so loudly I thought you'd wake the

others. I felt I should wake you, Brent, you're soaking wet!"

"A bloody awful nightmare. Thanks for waking me."

He had muttered a word in his sleep. "Maja." A woman's name, Diana thought. When he wiped his forehead with his arm, she pulled a cotton scarf from her pocket and dabbed it gently over his face.

"You'll get a chill," she whispered, "perspiring in this cold."

"I never get a chill."

Extending an arm to her, he pulled her closer. Diana, on her knees beside his cot, felt her heart flutter at the touch of his lips brushing hers.

She leaned to him, pressing her lips to his. His mouth opened hungrily, his tongue seeking the familiar taste of hers, lingering, until Diana moaned with need.

His eyes met hers, and for a time they only looked at each other, as though they were alone out here. The camp was quiet enough for them to risk the chance no one was watching them. Brent had been so careful up until now, but perhaps because it was their last night, he had finally let his guard down.

"I've never met anyone like you," he whispered. "And then you tell me you live in America. What bloody rotten luck!"

She wanted to respond, even tried, but she couldn't blurt out a protestation of love; it would only make it worse for both of them.

"Bloody rotten luck," he repeated, and his lips were on hers again; his bare chest crushed against her parka; his breath, sweet and heavy, mingled with her own.

The kiss was deep and lingering, bringing spiraling coils of passion to her body and tears to her eyes. For a long time, they held each other in silence. The futility of her love haunted her. His secrets haunted her.

At length she sighed as she held him. "Do you think all our comrades are really asleep over there?"

"We'll know in the morning. If we see people huddling together in hushed, private conferences, we'll know that someone was watching us."

"It doesn't seem to worry you."

"No, not tonight. Diana?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I take you to dinner on Saturday?"

So suddenly, just like that, her joy soared to one of the greatest heights she'd ever known. This wasn't to be their last night together, after all!

ON SATURDAY evening, Marcielle bolted into Diana's room, after her maid had let Brent in.

"You can't wear that dress!" She rushed to the closet and Diana watched in confusion as Marcielle drew out her black velvet evening gown. It reached midcalf, covered only one arm and shoulder and was cut very low in front. Diana protested, "That dress is—"

"Perfect! You lied to me, old mate. I don't believe you found this man in the bush! He's directly out of a cologne advert. He's driving a Mercedes, my dear! And you should see how he looks! Now just hurry, and I'll go tell him you'll be along straightaway."

Diana chose black pearl earrings and her mother's diamond-and-emerald ring. Black velvet heels. The transformation was complete.

When she entered the living room, Diana drew in her breath at the sight of Brent, scarcely noticing his stunned look when he saw her. In his dark evening clothes, she knew exactly what Marcielle had meant about a perfume ad; he was every woman's fantasy.

FROM THEIR table in the Three Ships at the top of the Carleton Hotel, they could look out on a million lights. Night had replaced the dust and roars of the large city with a spill of jewels. They ordered salad and lobster in wine sauce and a vintage late-harvest wine, which Brent said was the pride of the finest estate in Cape Province.

When the wine steward had filled their glasses, Brent raised his in a toast. "Soul mates," he said.

She savored the smooth taste of the wine, then asked, "Why do you call us 'soul mates'?"

"Because of what I saw in your eyes when you were too intrigued with the animals to realize I was watching you. You have a deep reverence for nature. As I have."

She smiled into his eyes.

After dinner he took her into the nightclub. In his arms on the dance floor, with the city lights flickering below, she thought of the lands out beyond, where the animals were murmuring and growling. Diana had never been happier, or sadder, because of what she had found here in

a dreamworld that did not belong to her.

It was very late when Brent drove her home. He saw her into the house and paused in the dimly lighted foyer.

"Do you want to come in?" she asked.

"It's much too late."

She smiled. "It was a memorable evening."

She felt his arms come around her in a warm and familiar embrace in which all the magic of the night was wrapped. And then his lips were on hers again. This incredible emotion, this longing, was surely what love songs were written about, she thought vaguely.

Brent was trembling, and his trembling grew more pronounced as he kissed her throat. He whispered, "Oh, Diana, what am I going to do... about you?"

Love me, her soul and body begged him silently. That's what you can do!

He straightened, still holding her. "Are you free tomorrow night? I have another trip in four days, so—"

"I'm free tomorrow," she interrupted.

"I'll call for you at seven."

"Would you like to have drinks first with Marcielle?"

"No, love. If you don't mind, I'd rather not." He kissed her softly on the cheek and then he was gone.

THE SOUND of the doorbell woke Diana. Sunlight was beating at the back of blue drapes, filling the room with a dreamy haze. She sat up, just

as Marcielle bustled in, her arms full of roses.

"Well, well! It must have been a night of nights. Look what just arrived!" She set the roses, which she had placed in a crystal vase, on the dresser top and proceeded to open the drapes.

"Brent sent roses?" Diana murmured groggily.

"Unless you know someone else named—" Marcielle looked at the card. "'Until tonight.'" She sat on Diana's bed. "Roses for the morning after?"

Diana looked at her sideways. "You're all wrong, Marcielle. We didn't sleep together last night. We ate at the Carleton and danced and talked, and then he brought me home."

"And he sent roses? He must be a man in love!"

"He's a man who knows women love roses."

Marcielle grinned, handing her friend the card.

"Red roses..." Diana was already thinking about the night ahead. And his eyes, and his remarkable smile. And the way he had kissed her last night, wanting her, asking what to do about wanting her....

*

DIANA WAS glad that Monday was Marcielle's day at the hairdresser; she could nap undisturbed until noon. Marcielle would be full of a thousand questions about last night, as in the old days, when they had traded secrets about their dates. But they weren't in college now.

The letter was on the table where the maid, Agnes, always set her mail. Diana squinted at the return address: "Jill Marsden, London." What a surprise! They had exchanged addresses, the way people always do after a shared adventure. Yet she hadn't expected Jill to write. Smiling, thinking back on Jill's good-natured attitude about "losing" Brent, Diana opened the envelope.

Diana, dear, I'm on the plane heading home. Super flight. The steward has promised to give this letter to the next Johannesburg-bound flight crew the minute they hit London, so it will be with you in no time. I know you will be there with your friend for another fortnight or so, and I wanted to catch you with this note before you left. I've just met the most fascinating man on this flight! In fact, he's sitting here next to me this moment, nodding off.

His name is Benjamin Howard and he's a sales rep for a London company. He's traveled to and from Johannesburg for years. I was telling Benjie about the safari, and he said a business associate once recommended the same company—Gemsbok Safaris—because he knew the owner (our gorgeous Brent) personally. And listen to this, Diana! Brent has a past that would make any reporter, including this one, salivate! He's an ex-convict! A murderer, Benjie says! He heard

that Brent Kerry murdered his wife!

Diana's eyes blurred as they fixed on those words. "Murdered his wife..." she read again, the paper trembling in her hand. A sickening sensation curled in her throat.

Unbelievable, isn't it? But no wonder Brent was so camera shy and wouldn't ever talk about himself. Well, I doubt you've seen him since the safari, but just in case you do, how about prodding for some details and letting me know?

I hope you're enjoying the remainder of your holiday. Don't lose my address. I still have yours in Colorado, and I'll send you a copy of my safari story when it comes out.

Adventurously yours,
Jill

The shock hit hard. Diana paled, bruising under the force of a few scribbled, grisly words. She stood up, her legs weak, and walked to the window, gazing out at the blustering August wind. Jill had confirmed what she suspected: something dreadful had happened in Brent's life.

Standing at the window, she felt tears on her cheeks. The powerful oracle rumbled, then shouted from inside her; she felt no resentment for his trying to keep his secret from her! She trusted Brent's goodness as a human being! Shivering, she whispered to the wind, "If I believe this

much in him, then, God help me, I must truly love him."

THE wind-whipped day became a chilly evening. Brent arrived promptly at seven o'clock. Dressed warmly in brown wool slacks, a black sweater and suede heels, Diana met him at the door. Wind snapped at the tails of her belted coat as she walked with him to his car.

Inside the white Mercedes, he squeezed her hand. "I keep forgetting how beautiful you are."

She brushed her windblown hair from her eyes. "I keep forgetting how good it is to see you."

The magical, familiar warmth passed between them. Yet now a cloud hung over their private world—a cloud Brent had lived under and tried to keep from her.

She had told herself that all that mattered was her trust in him. But now, in the choking shadows, she accepted another truth: it mattered to her what had happened.

She had to confront Brent with this. It was going to be the hardest thing she'd ever done, but she had to do it.

Brent had invited her to his home for dinner and now he turned north, toward the freeway. "I remembered how you enjoyed those lamb chops on the safari," he was telling her. "So I've ordered them for our dinner."

With only a vague idea of what he'd been saying, Diana tried to smile, but her mind whirled. It wouldn't be right to pretend. And Brent would want to know what Jill Marsden had told her. There was so

little time left to be with him...so little time.

Some kilometers north of Pretoria he turned sharply onto a road that wound through a wooded area. Homes began to appear, large homes, situated far apart. The Mercedes swerved into a drive lined with acacia trees. Set back from the road, a single-story white house sprawled. A fountain splashed in front amid gardens now filled with winter foliage. Pole lamps filled the garden entry with cold light. He led her over a stone path to high, hand-carved double doors.

They were greeted by Brent's smiling servants, a man and a woman. "The fire is waiting," the man said.

Diana followed Brent into a room where a fire blazed in a great stone fireplace. Heavy dark furniture, oil paintings on the walls, floors adorned with Persian rugs issued richness. It was a wealthy home—it made her think of a castle—and she remembered his stories of a privileged childhood.

In silence he led her from the living room into a cold hallway lighted by small candle-shaped lamps. He opened a door at the end of the hall.

She paused, staring in at his bedroom as he switched on one brass lamp, then another. A four-poster, which dominated the upper portion of the room, was spread with a rich fabric that resembled a tapestry. The far wall was gray stone with a fireplace in its center. Four steps led down to a sunken hearth area where deep-cushioned brown velvet seats formed a square conversation pit.

The fire was already blazing. Silent in cold, still shadows, the upper room was dimly lighted and chilly, but the conversation pit was warm.

Diana stood staring into the flames, her back to Brent, rubbing her upper arms as if she couldn't get warm. Moving behind her softly, he encircled her in his arms.

"My love," he whispered.

He was trailing kisses over her ear.

Her body, as if it had a life of its own, responded to his touch with wild yearning. But the strangling shadows swooped down again. She knew they would never release her until she faced this thing squarely.

Sensing something wrong, Brent straightened.

"What is it, Diana? Why are you looking at me like that? Are those tears...?"

She shook her head fiercely, blinking, forcing the tears back.

"I didn't mean to..." she began.

"Something's the matter. Tell me."

She couldn't look at him. In a thin, shaky voice she began, "I got a letter from Jill Marsden today. It was all full of terrible gossip about you—about your life."

Now it was Brent who stiffened. She felt his body move slightly away, heard him exhale. The warmth of his hands left her shoulders, and she felt cold all over.

Brent's eyes narrowed. "What did she tell you?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"I'm sure I don't. But I think you'd better tell me."

"Jill met a man on the plane back to London who had heard of you. He told her you are...an ex-convict."

Brent's only response was a shuddery silence. After a very long time, he muttered, "Go on. I'm sure he didn't stop there."

Diana could scarcely get the next half-strangled words out. "The man said you were in prison for murdering your wife."

The expression in his light eyes was one she'd never seen: sparks of fury, then a dull cloudiness.

"Is it true, Brent?"

"No, Diana," he answered gruffly. "It's not true."

Diana's aching was washed by a great flood of relief.

She found her trembling voice. "How could he say it, Brent? Did he can confuse you with someone else?"

"No," he rasped.

The sinking sensation again. "Brent? Did you...were you..." Her voice caught in her throat. "Married?" she finished.

"Yes, I was married. My wife...is dead. There was...an accident, Diana. Some people put the blame on me and I was charged with murder. But I wasn't responsible."

"Your wife was...killed?"

"Yes. A long time ago. I'm sorry you had to learn about me that way."

"I'm sorry, too. But you had to know what Jill said."

"Yeah," he agreed weakly. "I'm glad you told me."

She could sense his discomfort and she wanted the discomfort gone for both of them, wanted back the en-

chantment of before. "You don't want to talk about it."

"No..." he began, "not now..."

"Or ever?"

He looked at her. "How important is it to you?"

She fought back the tears. "You said... it was an accident, that Jill's information was wrong. You weren't in prison?"

"I was in prison for a short time. But I've never killed anyone. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you."

"I should have told you more about me. The reason I didn't was—"

"I know. It was because our time together is so short. And temporary."

"I'm sorry. Was I so wrong?"

"No, I didn't think you were wrong. Our lives before we met had nothing to do with our short time together now. If you don't want to talk about it, I respect that. I believe in you, Brent. That's all that matters right now."

He reached to pull her closer and stroked her hair so lovingly she was surprised and deeply moved. "You're special, Diana. You are so precious to me."

In the firelight he held her for a long time, with soft music filling the corners of the quiet room. Music and warmth and the flickering light washed over them. She felt Brent's pain, sorry she had caused it tonight. But she knew he wouldn't lie to her about his innocence. She was as certain of this as of tomorrow's sunrise.

So sensitive was he to her unraveling emotions that he made no move toward her, only held her, waiting for a sign from her that her doubts had been erased.

She began to sway against him, feeling the music. Her fingertips brushed his face. His eyes met hers and lingered—silent assurance that everything was all right and always had been.

The kiss began softly and rose to trembling passion. Before it ended, they had tumbled down onto the cushions, lost in each other, and in the rapturous consummation of unconditional trust, unconditional love.

HIS NAKED body, wet with perspiration, shone golden in the firelight. Lying limply against her arm, he opened his eyes and gazed at her as though he had known her forever and yet as though he were seeing her for the first time.

"Diana," he said huskily, "I love you."

She smiled through tears. "I love you."

His fingers brushed them softly away. "Why would fate bring us together? Give us these moments of love and then snatch them away?"

He held her for a long time before he asked, "Are you getting cold? The fire is burning down. I'll throw another log on and find us something to wrap up in."

He left the sofa bed to tend the fire. "As a matter of fact, I seem to recall inviting you to dinner."

He returned carrying two robes, and handed one to her. She slid into

the folds of beige velveteen while he fastened the belt of a shorter, pale blue robe, then brought a bottle of burgundy and two long-stemmed glasses from a cabinet across the room. She asked, "Are we properly dressed for dinner now?"

"Absolutely." He handed her a glass of wine. "Excuse me while I go talk to Lily about our food."

Waiting, she watched the logs throw out sparks and wondered, without caring much, what Brent's maid would think of his state of undress. The warm scent of him was still on her skin. Cries and gasps of his runaway passion remained with her and belonged to her. The way he had whispered her name was hers to keep. For always.

Twenty minutes later his maid brought the meal she had prepared for them: broiled lamb chops, fresh salad, boiled potatoes with parsley and butter.

While they ate by the fire, Diana's thoughts spun about the big house with its many closed doors. She asked, "Did you live in this house with your wife?"

"Yes."

They heard a loud shudder at the window. "Wind," Brent said. "The storm is growing stronger. It's raining hard. I don't think we ought to go out in it again, do you?"

"No." She smiled, wanting him again already. "With the storm, it's so cozy here."

DIANA AWOKE in his arms when the first light of morning touched the closed drapes. She knew Brent was already awake. The room was very

cold. Under goose-down quilts in the four-poster she snuggled into the warmth of him and asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"I have a safari starting out in two days, and by the time I get back you'll have already left for America."

She nudged closer. "Let's try not to dwell on it."

Brent sighed. "Our worlds are too far apart, Diana. We both know that, but, my God, I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you, too. I'll miss you forever."

"If only..." he said huskily, "there were some way."

"But there isn't, Brent. I have responsibilities at home. I couldn't live here even if—"

"No, my love, you couldn't. I'd never ask that."

It was more than just Diana's family and work responsibilities back in Colorado, and they both knew it. She didn't feel comfortable in South Africa and never would. Its values were too incompatible with her own.

"We're trapped in limbo, Diana," he said softly.

She nodded and said in a tiny voice, "We have tonight..."

"Yes. And today and most of tomorrow, if you'll stay with me."

"You don't have to work today?"

"I asked Johannes and Rennie to handle all the preparations for the next trip."

"All this time alone together, Brent? It's like a dream!"

He kissed her.

"I brought my toothbrush with me, but no other clothes."

"Who needs clothes?"

"Right. Who does?"

"We could stay right here where it's warm."

"There's a helluva grand idea."

His leg moved up over hers. She caressed his lower back and his hips, surrendering to her insatiable need for him, feeling his arousal come alive with hers.

THE MAROON drapes lightened with the penetrating noonday sun; shadows in the big room seemed to melt. One small, pulsing cinder blinked like a red eye from the fireplace ashes.

"I won't let you get cold." Brent's hot breath in her ear sent delicious sensations down her spine.

"You sure won't! Not if you keep doing that."

"Do you like this?" he asked in a husky whisper. "And this?"

Her breath quickened. Her arm across his chest, she could feel his hard heartbeat. "Don't stop. Tell me all other flights of the day are canceled."

"There are no other flights. All points of interest are right here."

"Are they, now? Are you going to be the guide?"

"With pleasure. Let's see. There must be some points of interest here somewhere..."

Under the sheets, his hand felt warm against her breasts. She snuggled closer, moving her knee against him. "I had a different point of interest in mind..."

"Watch out while you're traveling. I'm ticklish."

"I'll be careful."

"Don't be careful."

"I'll be daring, then."

"That's better. Daring is a lot better. Anywhere but the ribs."

"Anywhere?"

"Everywhere. We have all day."

WEARING ONE of Brent's shirts over her slacks, Diana flopped along in his rubber thongs, looking out at the rural landscape. In mid-afternoon the sun was bright against a clear blue sky. As they walked hand in hand over the spacious grounds, their minds were lingering in the lusty, love-scented air of the leisurely morning.

"We are good together. Perfect together." Brent sounded almost as though he was talking to himself.

She squinted at him in the sunshine, shading her eyes. "You know, everything you say makes me happy and sad at the same time."

"Everything about us is happy and sad, damn it. I'm trying to think only of the moment."

His maid had brought a late breakfast of bacon and eggs and fresh fruit to the room. Brent had opened champagne. They had lounged about in his robes, listening to music, satiated with love, until eventually Brent had expressed a desire to get outdoors. They could have lunch out there. It was one of those Transvaal winter days that made all the world feel beautiful.

They walked in silence for a time, until she reluctantly expressed her thoughts. "I'm flying down to the

Wilderness for three days alone before I meet Marcielle in Cape Town. I won't get back to Johannesburg till the day before I have to leave for Denver."

He seemed surprised. "The beach can be bloody cold this time of year. The Wilderness will be nearly deserted."

"I hope so. I'm counting on it being cold and deserted, to fit my mood."

THEY DIDN'T arrive back in town until late the next afternoon. Brent had left himself little time for his business preparations for the safari trip. Now, as he pulled into Marcielle's driveway, everything they could say to each other had already been said. They were drained and empty, and Diana was furiously fighting back tears. He didn't kill the engine, but only stopped, reached over and squeezed her hand. "Write to me."

She nodded, then said, "You, too."

"I will." His hand squeezed hers harder. She had reached for the door handle. "Be happy, Diana."

The tears were beginning. She nodded, pressed hard on his hand and then released him and got out. She didn't look back as she heard the Mercedes pull out of the driveway.

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DIANA'S PLANE landed at the town of George on the southernmost coast of Africa. Here she was met by a hotel bus that carried her down to the sea through a stretch of magnificent

scenery. Behind the beach, inlets opened to form bright blue lagoons and marshy meadows. There were hotel buildings among the trees on the low sea cliffs, but the beaches looked deserted.

Even the hotel lobby was deserted. Her driver set down her bags at the desk and a smiling receptionist appeared, carrying a cup of tea. Diana was invited to have tea as she checked in, but she politely refused, not wanting, at the moment, the company of strangers. The driver took up her bags again and led her down a hallway to her room, where he opened yellow drapes to a spectacular view of the sea and the coastline.

She changed quickly to jeans and a sweatshirt and made her way down a footpath to the beach below, the sea wind blowing her hair.

She sat by the sea, listening to the lonely call of a gull and the crashing of the waves, until she began to shiver in the last rays of the sun. The water was changing from turquoise to dusky gray.

By the time she returned to her room, Diana was quite chilled. She showered and changed into wool slacks and sweater and went into the lounge, where a bright fire was blazing and one or two other people were sitting, visiting. She ordered sherry and sat by the fire, remembering the safari campfires with Brent beside her and the sounds of wild animals close by.

Vaguely she became aware that a man had sat down on a chair beside hers and was saying something to

her. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "I don't understand Afrikaans."

The man switched to English easily. "Are you waiting for someone, or may I join you?"

Diana swallowed. "I'm...I was just getting ready to leave, actually."

He smiled. "There isn't anyplace to go, is there, except to the dining room? Are you having dinner?"

"No..." she answered, knowing it would be as impossible for her to eat tonight as it would to stop thinking about the campfire where Brent would be this moment. "I'm not feeling very well. I was about to go to my room."

"Well, tomorrow, perhaps?"

"Perhaps." She forced a smile and set down the glass.

SHE AWOKE at dawn to the sound of the surf's roar, feeling stiff and half alive. With a grim resolve to pull herself together, she dressed and went to see if it was possible to get breakfast at such an early hour. The dining room was deserted. She turned to leave but a man in a white apron appeared. "May I help you, miss?"

"I guess I'm too early for breakfast."

"The dining room doesn't open for an hour, but not to worry. I am the cook. What may I get for you?"

She smiled. "Would you have coffee made yet?"

"Of course! Now what else? Eggs and ham?"

"Sounds wonderful. I missed dinner last night."

The fresh, steaming coffee and excellent food lifted Diana's spirits. She paid the cook lavish compliments, which he accepted with exuberance. After breakfast she ventured out into the morning chill, pulling her jacket around her as she made her way to the beach. She spent the morning exploring the shores of the lagoon, then hiked back to the hotel for lunch. As she sat alone by the window, watching the ocean, the sound of the rushing tides called her back.

She sat on the sand, staring out to sea. It was useless trying not to think about Brent. She loved him more than she thought possible. The real heartache was that she would never love him less. Brent was part of her now.

The sun moved westward, and the evening chill came once again. Sighing, she looked down the deserted beach. A figure stood on the sea cliff, and for an instant she imagined it was Brent.

"I'm really in bad shape," she admitted aloud. "Every man I see makes me think of him." The figure stood still for a moment, then an arm raised in a wide, circling wave. She looked around, but there was no one else on the beach. The man had to be waving at her. She waved back and saw the figure move toward the path. He was coming down to the beach. Brent? Brent? No, it couldn't be!

But as she watched the figure rushing impatiently down the path, she rose to her feet and started to make her way over the slippery rocks, back to the sand.

Her heart was pounding wildly. Her footprints made a fast path through the wet sand as she ran. A gull soared and dived above her, as Brent's name formed on her lips and the distance closed between them.

She was in his arms, too out of breath to speak. They stood on the cold, deserted beach wrapped in each other, breathing hard.

"My love..." Brent whispered, his lips against her blowing hair. His eyes were soft with tenderness as he bent down to kiss her full on the lips, and tears seeped through her closed eyelids.

He led her by the hand back up the cliff path. Still panting, they passed through the winter gardens of the hotel and entered the corridor through a side door. Outside her room, Brent took the key from her and unlocked the door, then followed her in. He was in safari clothes—khaki shorts and shirt, knee socks and boots. She threw her windbreaker over a chair and went into his waiting arms again. Finally he broke the silence.

"I couldn't leave. I couldn't bear to leave you yet, Diana."

She could feel the beating of his heart against her. That, and the deep velvet sound of his voice made the moment real. "But how, Brent? What about your trip?"

"I sent along another guide. They can manage without me for three days. Then I'll fly to Maun and continue on with them."

Three days! He planned to stay three days with her! Diana's spirit soared.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you. And how I love you." He kissed her. His hands moved through her thick, dark hair and across her back and over her breasts outside the bulky sweater.

I'm dreaming, she kept thinking. He had flown halfway across South Africa for three more days with her.

"You're so full of surprises. Always surprises..." Giddy with happiness and with desire for him, she began unbuttoning his shirt.

"Take it off. Take all my clothes off."

"Where is your luggage?" she asked.

"In the lobby. I'll streak out and get it later." He sat on the bed and began unlacing his boots.

"Streak out? Sure you will!"

"Much later," he qualified as he stripped.

When he stood up, she said, "If only I were an artist... I would paint you naked. You're a Greek god!"

"To the best of my knowledge Greek gods weren't usually depicted in my state of arousal. Would you paint me this way?"

"Yes, this way. Wanting me." She hugged him, nuzzling against the part of him that was so ready for her love. His skin felt warm to her touch.

He lifted her onto the bed and undressed her. When she lay naked, he paused only moments before he lowered his body and entered her swiftly, almost desperately. But once inside, he was still for several moments, breathing deeply, holding her. He whispered her name and held her quietly.

As soon as she felt the swaying of his body against hers, she responded to the rhythm of his love. Their passion surged so wildly it was as if the earth had rolled out of orbit and into timeless space. Caught helpless in the silken space until the moment of release, Brent groaned, and the sound sent her spinning to a height where stars were bursting from their place in eternity like an explosion of a billion lights.

He lay without any sign of motion, his lips parted, his eyes closed. She touched his cheek. "Brent?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you alive?"

His eyes did not open. "I've never been so alive."

She hugged him tenderly, then after a while she asked, "You flew out from Jo'burg? Have you eaten today? The kitchen is closed now, but maybe they could send in something."

"Like Scotch?"

"All right. I'll call for some Scotch."

"Tell them to bring my bag with it, would you? I'll be back in a few minutes." He rose and went into the bathroom. When he returned, Diana, wearing a black satin robe, was opening the Scotch.

Accepting a drink from her, he plopped onto the bed again and pulled the sheet up over his waist.

"I've never seen you gulp Scotch like that," she said.

"I'm fortifying myself for what I feel I have to do before I leave you again," he answered.

She sat on the bed beside him. "What is it, Brent?"

He set down his glass. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, Diana. This is a bloody small country. It's a tight culture with such a small population of Europeans. Our newspapers don't miss a thing that goes on. I hate like hell to think of you hearing rumors about me and thinking that the man who says he loves you wasn't honest enough to tell you the truth about himself. I owe you that."

She touched his arm. "Darling, are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. But it's not a pleasant story to have to listen to."

She rose and sat in the chair across from him.

"I told you I studied political science at Cambridge. I followed in my father's footsteps and thanks to his name—which isn't Kerry—I was elected the youngest member ever to serve in Parliament. I changed my name later for the sake of my business—after the scandal."

He poured himself another drink. "I married a girl from one of the most prominent families in the republic. Her family was in diamonds. Mine was in gold. Our wedding was one of the biggest bashes ever held in Pretoria."

"I loved my wife, but there was something about her I didn't know soon enough. She had a problem with alcohol. Liquor changed her personality entirely, and this was a bloody serious problem, considering the number of state parties and social gatherings we had to attend. The night she died we had been to a Christmas party, the great social affair of the summer, and I had hus-

tled her out so intoxicated she could barely walk.”

Brent sat back against the head of the bed. “Maja was furious with me for making her leave. In the parking lot she jumped into her sports car and roared out, trying to get away from me. I was able to jump in alongside her and tried to get her to stop. Instead, she raced out onto the road, and in her fury, drove off a deep embankment—almost a cliff. The sound of the crash was deafening. I’ll never forget it as long as I live. The auto landed on the passenger side. There was smashed glass and blood everywhere. I heard Maja’s scream over the sound of the impact. Sometimes I still hear that scream in my dreams.

“The minutes immediately following the crash I’m unsure about, but eventually I realized Maja had been thrown from the car. I could hear her calling to me to help her, but I didn’t know where she was.

“When I found her,” he went on, “she was crying and still calling to me. Her voice was strong and I thought she was all right. The thing foremost on her mind was that her life would be ruined when people discovered she had been drunk enough to cause this accident. By that time we could hear police sirens. I calmed her the only way I knew how—by agreeing to take the blame for driving—and I crawled, God knows how, into the driver’s seat. I don’t remember the police arriving. I lost consciousness hearing Maja saying she loved me. When I awoke in hospital two days later I was told she had died of her inju-

ries. It was in all the newspapers that I had been driving, and since I had been drinking at the party, too, I couldn’t prove I was sober. No sober person could have driven off the road like that. Maja’s family blamed me for her death and brought charges of manslaughter against me. By this time, I had a devil of a job convincing my own attorneys that Maja was driving that night.

“A police detective who was a longtime friend of mine investigated the accident thoroughly. He proved it was my blood on the ground and on the door of the passenger seat. They proved I’d been outside the car and crawled to Maja. Experts testified that the injuries to my left shoulder couldn’t have been sustained from the driver’s side of the car. So the evidence acquitted me. My defense held up. But it was the end of my career in Parliament.”

He closed his eyes. “I’ve tried to put it all behind me, Diana. I had a long time to think about what I would do with the rest of my life. The only good to come of any of it was I got into the profession I’d wanted all along. I was never suited to a politician’s life.”

In the overstuffed chair, Diana sat hugging her knees, watching him closely, tears welling in her eyes.

“My God, Brent...it’s so unfair...all of it!”

“Life usually isn’t very fair. I tried to protect Maja’s reputation, but I had to fight for my own survival, too.”

“You really loved her.”

"Yes. Losing her was the hardest part of it all by far. But my world is the bush now."

"Yet you've kept your home in Pretoria."

"As a sort of sanctuary."

Diana uncurled her legs and came to sit beside him on the bed again.

"I'm glad I don't have to wonder any longer what secret you were guarding."

"Now we can get on to better things."

"Such as?"

"Such as a hot shower before we dress for dinner. Want to join me?"

She lifted the sheet, exposing his nakedness. "Whenever you're ready."

They spent much of their stolen three days in the hotel room, in bed, talking, teasing, making love. Each morning after a late breakfast they walked on the beach, watching the waves crash in, searching the tide pools. One day they hiked into the forested foothills nearby and rented a little boat to explore the clear lagoon. Another day they went into the town of George for lunch in a rustic little café.

On their last night together Diana said, "Brent, this parting will be even harder than the first."

"Still," he continued after a sad silence, "I'll always love you." He kissed her in his soft, gentle way, which made her remember his first kiss, his first touch.

That night when he made love to her it was like the first time. He took her to his heart and to his body so slowly, savoring her, caressing and exploring her in a very possessive

way, as though every part of her belonged to him. In the same unhurried way he offered himself to her, convincing her she possessed him as no woman ever had or ever would, making believe the night would last forever.

Afterward she watched him sleep for a long, long time, mesmerized by the beauty of his face. She lay wide awake, not wanting the hours to pass, wanting to look at him forever. In those last dark hours of their time together, she thought about Brent's past, which didn't fit him, and of his future, which she knew nothing of except that she would not be in it.

*

THE SOUTH African Airways 747 climbed into the vast caverns of darkness and Diana watched the lights of Johannesburg flicker away. The plane circled northward; sky patterns changed. She leaned back as the stars of the Southern Cross sparkled into view. The giraffe, spirit of the night sky. Brent's deep voice floated back: "I'll remember you each time I see it."

A few hours in a jet plane, and continents change and seasons reverse. The stars make different scrollwork in the sky. A few hours, and a world is left behind and another is reentered. Now, Diana felt the promise of early autumn in Colorado.

Her grandmother had sent her driver, Edward, to meet Diana at the Denver airport.

The Rocky Mountains rose above, those symbols of home she loved so dearly.

The great house loomed on the horizon long before they reached it.

As Edward swung the limousine into the circular driveway, Rebecca Rolaine stepped onto the porch, smiling broadly. Diana waved. How small her grandmother looked against the backdrop of the great white brick house! She rushed up the steps and hugged her grandmother.

"So!" the older woman said. "The wanderer returns! Home is the gypsy from the Dark Continent!"

"Home is the gypsy," Diana repeated, thinking of the gypsy man she loved.

A few minutes later they were in Rebecca's favorite sitting room, drinking wine and eating crackers and cheese. Late-afternoon shadows were beginning to fill the quiet household.

Rebecca said, "You look like a crumpled traveler."

"I am a crumpled traveler. I've hardly slept."

The older woman smiled. "There will be time for you to tell me everything, darling. It can wait until you're rested."

Rest, Diana thought, would only give her more time to think about the part of her she had left in Africa.

SHE PLUNGED back into her work, rising every morning at five o'clock, a lifetime habit. After fixing herself a quick cup of coffee in the kitchen, she drove an hour to the campus and parked on the opposite side from the biology building to give herself a

walk in the brisk morning air. Except for one afternoon lab, Diana had arranged for the earliest classes they would give her, so she could be home by three o'clock to take care of her obligations there.

One afternoon, after work, Rebecca met her at the door with a small package. "This came registered mail from South Africa."

Diana set the package on a hall table. "I'll open it later. Right now I want to take a walk. It's been a grueling day."

"Maybe we can have supper afterward."

"That's fine," Diana called as she rushed up to change into her jeans.

Walking out into the meadow, she thought about the package from Brent, realizing she had deliberately put off opening it. Still she didn't pick it up when she returned to the house to shower and change. But after dinner she excused herself and carried the package to the sitting room, where she slowly tore off the paper. Inside was a smaller box of sky blue velvet. A tiny gasp escaped her lips as she gazed at the necklace inside—with diamonds in the shape of a giraffe. "Brent..." she whispered. "Brent..."

BRENT WROTE, but not often. During the South African summer, when the safaris didn't run, he was doing research for a wildlife service. But he was vague when describing the work. Christmas week he telephoned and they chatted for half an hour. After the conversation she felt very close to him, but an hour later the pain of

hearing his voice threw her into depths of longing.

As time passed, she made attempts to resume a social life, accepting occasional dinner dates with colleagues. Nothing worked. Men expected a good-night kiss and more, and Diana had none of herself to give.

One Saturday morning in mid-April Diana was painting a room in the old house. She had a roller in her hand when the telephone rang.

"It's Brent," the caller said. "I thought I'd find you home on Saturday morning."

The fluttering in her stomach, so familiar, started.

"Oh, Brent! It's always such a nice surprise to hear from you!"

"How is everything?"

"Status quo. How is it there?"

"Same as always. Missing you. I want to see you again, Diana. Do you realize it's been eight months?"

For a few seconds she couldn't answer. This was the first mention he had ever made of their seeing each other again. She said, "It seems longer."

"A bloody long time. Diana, I have some business in Kenya around the first week of June. I know you wrote that you're teaching summer school, but you have a few days between terms, haven't you? A week? Can you meet me in Nairobi for a week? I thought we could spend a few days at Tsavo. Beautiful lodge there, built over the animals' watering holes. You'd love it, sweetheart."

Her heart pounded. She knew the place he meant. Excitement swept

over her, and at the same time a strong, prickling fear. How could she ever go through a goodbye again? And yet... a magical week in a game reserve in Kenya with the man she loved...

"What do you think?" Brent prompted. "I can juggle my schedule to fit yours. I'll send you a round-trip ticket."

BRENT AND Diana stood at the window looking out over the great valley of the Tsavo wildlife preserve. Far below was a pool of fresh water where a dozen zebras were drinking. To the west, beyond the horizon, was Mount Kilimanjaro, and down on the plain, the great herds and night hunters of Africa. Wild Africa again. And Brent again. A dream that was real.

She still wore her traveling suit—a white blazer and skirt and a red-and-white-striped cotton shirt. Brent had met her at the Nairobi airport in a hired car, and they had started at once for Tsavo.

Now it was early evening. They had eaten dinner in the lodge dining room and then come to their room to unpack and be alone for the first time in ten months. Here the next six days were theirs. They could stay in if they felt like it, or hire a driver to take them into the heart of Tsavo.

The zebras below were ambling slowly away. On the opposite bank a dozen gemsbok were drinking. All hours, day and night, the animals came out of the shadows and from the brush to take their turns to drink. Diana and Brent stood for twenty minutes, watching the symphony of

moving animals as the day turned into night. When it was nearly dark the spotlights came on—an intrusion the animals had become accustomed to long ago.

He leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Are you sure you're not tired? Do you want to go to bed?"

"Does one have something to do with the other?" She smiled.

"Not necessarily."

His lips felt hot against hers, and then his tongue found hers; his hands were in her hair. Her heartbeat quickened as she responded to his kiss and his caresses. He took off her jacket and felt her breasts under the soft fabric of her shirt. "How I've longed to touch you again, Diana..." His lips were on her neck then and her throat, as his hands found her bra hook.

He held her naked breasts gently, gazing at them as though for the first time. "Your beauty astounds me."

Diana felt herself being lifted from the floor and carried to the bed, where he laid her down. He unfastened her skirt and slid it off, then slowly removed her panty hose and her lace bikini briefs.

"Brent..." she breathed, reaching for him, and he knelt down to kiss her, moving his mouth to her throat, nuzzling aside the chain of the jeweled giraffe. She moaned and writhed at the sensation of his tongue on her breasts. She could feel her body tense with anticipation as his fingers moved down over her naked skin, exploring, and his lips followed. Her thighs began to tremble at his touch and at the sensation of his kisses as he took possession of

every part of her, claiming back what had been his, savoring the taste and the scent and the softness of her.

At last she raised her eyes to his, questioning, and her hands clasped the material of his shirt, a protest to this barrier between their bodies.

He said, "Undress me," and lay down on the bed.

When she had, her hands wandered to his chest, her fingers fluttering over the hard muscles, then down slowly over his body to his thighs, to the source of his awakening passion, urging freshened arousal. Every movement of her hands and her lips held love and promise, promise cradled in beautiful memories and in the incredible passion built of longing. Ten months of longing. Holding her as if their bodies were one, he moved up over her, taking her with him to the place where their souls and their bodies became one with eternity.

DIANA OPENED her eyes to the first light of morning—pale silver light in the west windows of their room. Brent slept quietly beside her, lying on his back. She loved to look at him, because still, after all the time of knowing him, his perfection stunned her.

A strange, low noise like a small roll of thunder rumbled outside. Curious, Diana eased herself from the bed and slipped into her robe, padding to the window. A herd of buffalo was moving down from the center of the valley. The animals surrounded the watering place like a black swarm.

Brent stirred and asked groggily, "What's going on out there?"

"A buffalo herd has come down to drink. The herd seems endless."

He rolled over sleepily. She slid out of her robe and went back to him, pulling the sheet over them and snuggling into his warmth, her back to him, her hips pushed gently against his loins. His arm came around her and he dozed again with his hand on her breast. And in his warmth soon she, too, drifted back into sleep.

He seemed different that day, as though there was something on his mind. She noticed it after he had made love to her in the morning and again as she sat across from him at breakfast. Their driver met them after breakfast and took them over some of the narrow roads of Tsavo. They spotted elephants covered with red dust, giraffes by the dozen and an unfriendly rhino who threatened to charge the little car.

In the afternoon, after a light lunch, they were in bed again, making love. After the months apart, their passion seemed unquenchable. Yet at dinner, the strange look was still in Brent's eyes. Something different, something changed.

That evening, the lovers strolled hand in hand to a ridge above the watering holes. There was a bench there, and they sat together in the silence as the African night descended and the sky filled with stars. Diana searched the shimmering heavens. "The giraffe isn't here, is he? Aren't we too far north?"

"No, he's here. But he's much lower in the sky." Brent pointed.

"Oh! Oh, yes!" She sighed. "Do you think we value diamonds so much because they are the nearest things to stars that we can touch?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

She touched her necklace. "You gave me a piece of the southern sky to keep with me always."

"I'd like to give you all the sky. I'd like to..." But he didn't finish his thought, and looked away. Now he took her hand and held it tightly. "Diana, I don't want to live without you anymore."

Her heart stopped and she remained silent, aching.

He cleared his throat softly. "Will you marry me?"

She heard without believing. "Oh, Brent..." she whispered. "If only..."

His hand tightened over hers as she stammered without an answer. He said in a quiet voice, "These months away from you have been hell."

"For me, too..."

"Marry me, Diana. If you can't live in my world, I'll come to yours."

"What?" Her heart took a wild leap into her throat.

"I've had months to think about it. There's the bloody scandal I could never ask you to live with, but it came to me one day that I don't have to live with it, either. The truth is, except for material things, my business and my house, there's nothing to bind me to South Africa. In America I'd have no past to hide from. I'd be free."

What was he saying? "Brent...!"

"Hear me out, Diana, before you answer." His voice was soft and se-

rious. "I've been in contact with people in America and there are already two firm job offers, one based in Washington State, the other in California. One has to do with designing wildlife preserves. The other is in ecology research, partly in wilderness areas of Canada. I haven't made a decision, but I'm assured of finding work that interests me in my field.

"What I want to ask is, would you have to live in Colorado? Would California be close enough? If I build us a house in California, would you live there with me as my wife?"

Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she moved into his arms. "Oh, yes! Yes!"

She felt his hand brushing away the tears. Then his lips were on her wet cheeks and on her mouth. They held each other, while down at the watering hole a mother rhino and her baby were drinking and a lion growled somewhere in the distance.

"It will take some time to get my property sold. Johannes and Rennie want to buy Gemsbok Safaris and I'll carry the loan myself. The government will tie up a good portion of my money for years, but as nearly as I can determine, I should be clear to leave South Africa by October."

"Oh, I love you! Brent, I love you so much!"

He kissed her forehead, saying, "Pick a day in October."

Diana's head spun with the joy of new beginnings.

"My grandmother would be thrilled if I were married in her home. Would you want to be married there?"

"Whatever you arrange is fine with me." Brent drew out a small black velvet box and opened it slowly. She could see the shimmer of four large diamonds.

"Brent..." she whispered, stunned, as she watched him slide the ring onto her finger.

THE FEEL OF Rocky Mountain autumn was in the air. Diana awoke with a sinking fear and went to the window of her bedroom. The sky was clear blue over the mountains and the meadow, where horses frolicked in the morning cool. It was October 14, their wedding day. And Brent was not there.

She had no idea where he was. His plans to arrive a week earlier had fallen through. He had phoned from Johannesburg to tell her he had met with last-minute complications and would get there as soon as he could. No word had come from him since.

Slipping into her satin robe, Diana walked barefoot down the wide stairs and into the kitchen, where a young employee of Venus Wedding Consultants was polishing silver. "You're here so early, Tammy!"

She smiled. "There's so much to do for a wedding."

"But I thought everything was ready."

"Oh, it is! The house is. The flowers will arrive before noon. All the seating is worked out to the last detail. But Mrs. Rolaine decided to use the antique silver, and it was in no condition to be set out. But I'm glad we're using it, Diana. This is gorgeous stuff!"

"You've done a fantastic job," Diana said as she poured herself coffee.

But where was Brent? The wedding was scheduled for four in the afternoon, only eight hours away. She carried her cup upstairs and walked into her dressing alcove, where her wedding gown was hanging. She never tired of looking at the magnificent dress that Rebecca had worn on her wedding day half a century ago—an old-fashioned gown of heavy off-white linen lace, fitted tightly to the bodice and high at the neck. At first Diana had balked at going all out this way for her wedding. But Rebecca had insisted that Brent would love an old-fashioned American wedding; it would be a day of wonderful memories. Diana was persuaded Rebecca was right. As always.

Close friends had been invited, Diana's colleagues and longtime buddies, and old family friends. Not more than thirty, she had insisted; they didn't want to overwhelm the South African groom, who was a stranger to them all.

Brent had to be en route to the States, en route to Denver, somewhere. *He'll get here*, Diana told herself fiercely for the thousandth time. *It's still early in the day. He'll get here!*

THE WALL CLOCK in Diana's bedroom chimed three-fifteen. The bride and her maid of honor, Terri Daas, sat in jeans and loose shirts, drinking bourbon and gazing every few minutes at the clock. Lingerie was carefully laid out on the bed. Bou-

quets of pink and white roses lay on the dresser. Terri's pale pink gown hung lifelessly beside Diana's wedding gown.

Diana said glumly, "I thought about telephoning the guests this morning, but I just wasn't willing to give up hope that Brent would get here. People are starting to arrive. How the devil am I going to tell them the groom didn't show? Rebecca is going to die over this."

Terri gulped her drink. "What about Charles Melbourne? I suppose he's the logical bearer of the bad news. When I came upstairs he was standing in the dining room, drinking Scotch and asking where the groom was. He was becoming a wreck before my eyes."

"Poor Charles," Diana said of the old family friend who was waiting downstairs to give the bride away. "How do I tell Charles?" She clenched her fists. "Oh, damn, Terri! Brent wouldn't have changed his mind! Something must be terribly wrong, or he would be here."

The clock chimed three-forty-five. Diana and Terri looked at each other but did not move. Somebody was going to have to move, they knew, but neither did. At five minutes to four Terri raised her head from her glass. "Diana, what's the noise?"

"I don't know. A low plane or a helicopter or..."

Terri's eyes widened. "*Helicopter?*"

"Oh! Oh, God!" Diana leapt to her feet and ran to the window, but she could see nothing, so she ran across the carpeted hall to another

bedroom, which offered a view to the front.

On the spacious front lawn of the estate a helicopter was setting down, its blades whirring, its motor churning loudly. The door opened and Brent ducked out into the cool October afternoon, carrying a suitcase and a coat. His hair was blowing; the jacket of his gray tuxedo was flapping open.

Terri was squeezing Diana's arm so tightly it hurt. Charles Melbourne and Thornton "Thornie" Parker, a second cousin of Diana's, were running out onto the lawn to meet the groom. Thornton had volunteered to stand up for the groom at the ceremony. Brent smiled at the approaching strangers and turned to wave to the helicopter pilot as the machine began to lift off.

Diana stood transfixed at the window, her heart thumping wildly.

"He made it!" Terri screamed. "He's ready and you're not!" She tugged at Diana's shirt. "We have to get dressed! Hurry, Diana! It's after four!"

Twenty minutes later they were rushing down the circular stairs, holding up the trains of their gowns, balancing their bouquets. Diana knew the feeling in her head had nothing to do with the bourbon Terri had coaxed her to drink. It was that strange sensation of living a dream.

From the downstairs living room came the sounds of the pianist's expressive rendition of Rachmaninoff's "Paganini Rhapsody," Diana's special request. Charles Melbourne stood at the entrance to the living room, smiling up at them.

Diana moved alongside him and stood gazing through double doors into the room where she was about to become Brent Kerry's wife.

The room was filled with flowers. Crystal chandeliers were sparkling. On each side of the aisle, which was lined with wide white ribbons, their guests sat. Against a backdrop of flowers, the old Reverend Mr. Stone stood solemnly, all in black. To his left, in his gray tuxedo, Brent adjusted his tie. At the sight of him, Diana's heart began to thunder again. Brent appeared perfectly composed—the immaculately groomed ex-member of Parliament who had once been at home in the elite social circles of the Republic of South Africa.

Brent's eyes shifted to the doors at the back of the room, where his bride stood shimmering in lace, pink flowers in her dark hair, her arms full of roses. Diana could see the stunned look on his face at the sight of her, the same look she had seen a year and a half ago in a parking lot in downtown Johannesburg.

Staring, Brent took an impatient step forward. Diana's breath caught as the room and the people blurred and disappeared and there was only Brent.

She saw him not here in Rebecca's living room, but out on the sea cliff, rushing down to meet her. "Brent . . . ?"

Breathlessly, recklessly, Diana thrust her wedding bouquet into the arms of an astounded Charles and broke into a near run. The piano rhapsody had become circling cries of sea gulls; the awed murmur of the

guests became the sound of the singing sea.

A smile formed on Brent's lips as his bride rushed to meet him. Then she was in his arms. The distance was closed; the waiting over—forever.

Gradually Diana and Brent realized the music had stopped. Guests gasped and twittered; the preacher gaped. Embarrassed, Diana turned toward Rebecca, who had risen to her feet. But the shock on her grandmother's face was turning to laughter. With her shrewd, highbred sense of knowing how to reverse dis-

aster, Rebecca raised her white-gloved hands and began to applaud.

Rising in unison, the guests applauded with her. Diana looked up into Brent's light gray eyes, sharing his surprise, as if both she and Brent were unsure what had just happened. Behind them, Terri was strolling up the aisle on the arm of Charles Melbourne. Smiling, Brent extended his hand to his bride, as they walked back up the aisle to the Reverend Stone, with the guests standing and Terri giggling and the wide, dark ocean too far away to matter anymore.



STAR SIGNS—MARCH & APRIL



CAPRICORN December 23–January 22

Changes are on the horizon and you will be eager to take on the challenge. Romance is well aspected, and you could see someone close in a new light.



AQUARIUS January 23–February 22

Interesting developments set you thinking about one or more aspects of your life. Now is an excellent time to try to achieve a long-held ambition.



PISCES February 23–March 22

Relationships could prove tricky, especially at the start of the month. You will need to express yourself more clearly if others are to understand your viewpoint.



ARIES March 23–April 22

A hectic social life could find you neglecting your duties. You should sort out your priorities if you don't want to anger those who may depend on you.



TAURUS April 23–May 22

The choices you now face will affect not only your future, but those close, too. So think carefully before acting and only take the advice of those you really trust.



GEMINI May 23–June 21

A happy-go-lucky month when everything seems to go your way. Relax and enjoy yourself, as you have been under a lot of pressure lately.



CANCER June 22–July 22

You've been unsure of yourself lately, but as the month unfolds, you will feel more positive and there will be some happy times with your partner, adding sparkle to your life.



LEO July 23–August 22

An exciting period starts this month, and although there are changes to be made, you will be feeling very positive and able to cope—even if others don't share your enthusiasm.

STAR SIGNS (continued)

**VIRGO August 23-September 22**

Don't rush into anything and don't let your temper get the better of you. These could be testing times, and you need to keep your friends around you, as their support will prove invaluable.

**LIBRA September 23-October 22**

You are in an excellent frame of mind and full of good ideas. Friends seek you out, and socially it is a fulfilling month. A close partner could be jealous of your popularity, so make sure to include them in your plans.

**SCORPIO October 23-November 22**

Work could prove very demanding and you may have to make some sacrifices in order not to let anyone down. A family celebration late in the month brings the chance to unwind and start enjoying yourself.

**SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22**

Travel plans are well aspected and you could be surprised at your ability to fit in more than you originally thought. A romantic encounter, however brief, leaves you with that special feeling.

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Romances

THE HEART'S YEARNING • Annette Broadrick

When Laura Phillips decides to move to the little Texas town where her natural son, Mike, now fourteen, lives, she is unprepared for the complications that arise. Hoping just to get to know the boy and watch him grow up, she finds herself instead falling in love with his widowed father, Adam Kincaid. But Adam has no idea of Laura's true identity.

A LOVE SO TENDER • Tracy Sinclair

Maybe Pat Lee was using Raven Master's Wyoming estate to hide out and heal her wounds, but it was no business of his. Especially when he'd soon be bored with the place—and his disturbing interest in her!—and return to the excitement of New York City. She could never go back there—not without facing the demons of a disastrous marriage that had caused her to abandon the city and the risky business of love in the first place.

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and many more in
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READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #29

ACROSS

1. Flower holder
5. _____ Jima
8. Rotisserie
12. March 15th
13. Actor Johnson
14. Mellow out
15. Coast
17. Sailing
18. Naval rank: abbr.
19. "Cakes and _____"
20. Reed instruments
21. Peter and Nick: abbr.
22. Hockey great
23. Capri and others
26. Optimistic trends
30. New York stadium
31. Half a fly
32. New York canal
33. Guarantees
35. Ancient Mexican
36. Raced
37. Sent or date starter
38. Pass into law
41. Muscle twitch
42. Scottish cap
45. Unwilling
46. Neptune's steed?
48. Actress Anderson
49. Writing implement
50. Vigorous walk
51. Soon
52. Bustle

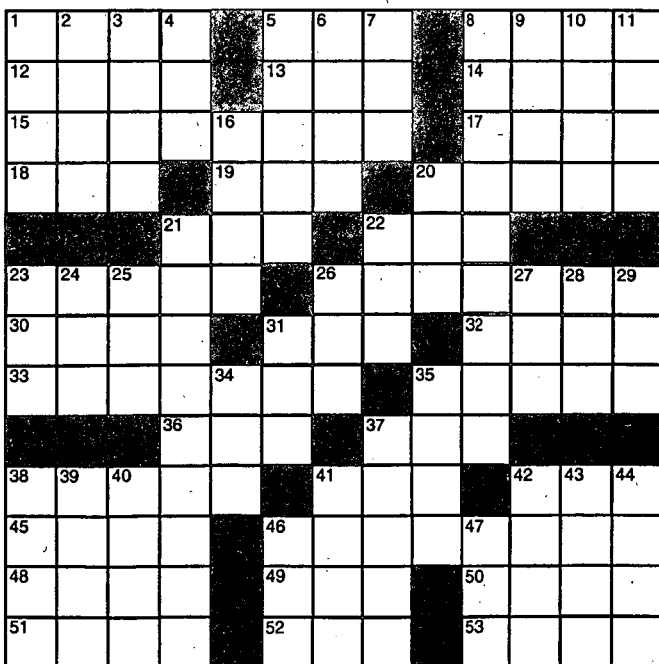
53. Donny of "Happy Days"

DOWN

1. Gripping tool
2. Capital of Yemen
3. Seven waters
4. Superhero's chest letter
5. False gods
6. Had on
7. Singleton
8. Light, cool wind
9. El _____
10. Understanding phrase
11. Social affairs

16. Abzug's collection
20. Sphere
21. Water creature
22. Unlock, poetically
23. "Rose _____ rose..."
24. Silencing sounds
25. Guitarist Paul
26. Ship letters
27. Actor Carney
28. Cravat
29. Dry, as wine
31. Start of a countdown
34. "Brother _____"
35. Kind of enemy
37. Ivories' locale
38. Singer Fitzgerald
39. Midday
40. _____ time (never)
41. Began a golf match
42. Kingston group
43. Requests
44. Encounter
46. Ems, e.g.
47. Unit of electrical resistance

Solution on page 63 of this issue.



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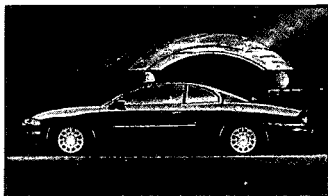


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